LUX CRUCIS

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A TALE OF THE GREAT APOSTLE

BY

SAMUEL M. GARDENHIRE

NEW YORK AND LONDON
HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS
1904

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Published January, 1904.

TO

MY KINSMAN AND FRIEND

THE RIGHT REVEREND ETHELBERT TALBOT

EPISCOPAL BISHOP OF CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA

THIS STORY OF THE GREAT CHURCHMAN IS

AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED

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I

CÆSAREA

THE city was awakening to life. On the flat tops of the low houses, in the northwesterly and more populous portion, figures began to appear, creeping, one by one, through the openings upon the roofs. They spread rugs of sheepskin or of tapestry near the stone copings of their dwellings, and silently knelt in prayer. The sun had risen above the line of hills to the northeast, and its beams gilded softly the neighboring eminences, touching with shafts of gold the summit of the Roman theatre and the columns of the new arena beyond the barracks of the Roman soldiers. Afar in the east a fragment of the desert, a thin peninsula from the arid wastes of Arabia, lay a mass of white sand in the awakening light, while to the west the sea was quiet under the splendor of a tropic morning, reflecting from its green depths the shadows of the Roman galleys at anchor in the harbor.

Immediately south of the palace, the principal and most imposing building within the view, its façade turned towards the sea and fronting upon an open court in which was erected a shaft of marble surmounted by a Roman eagle, a long, low building was still quiet under

the influence of the night. About it were no signs of life. Its line of windows looked over a low wall into a narrow street, and a stone gallery connected its rear with a statelier structure of dome and cupola. This was the Hall of Justice, through the medium of which Roman authority was indirectly communicated to the Jewish populace of Palestine. About the colonnades of the low building and along its wall a vine grew profusely, the foliage entering the corridor, which ran the length of the structure. Into this corridor, from a wall of dull brick, there opened numerous doors, black and heavily barred.

The morning breeze which came from the sea rustled the leaves of the foliage about the windows and carried a breath of the awakened day into the recesses of the corridor, coming gratefully to a prisoner who stood at one of the barred doors. His form was not yet visible in the gloom of the interior, but his face at the opening of his door was distinctly seen, and the fingers which gripped the iron rods were white and shapely.

It was a pleasant face, of bold eyes and strong features, in which courage and resolution were dominant; it gave no evidence that the prisoner was either cowed or intimidated by the confinement to which he had been subjected. The expression of his lips suggested a sense of joyous humor, free from mockery, but indicating a vigorous and exuberant life. He was watching intently a shadow near one of the pillars of the corridor, which gradually took outline as the light increased. It was the figure of a man at his devotions. He was resting upon one knee, his head bowed low and partially supported upon his arm, which, in turn, rested against the column. He was not conscious of the inspection he underwent from the face at the aperture in the door, nor did he heed the murmur from without, which gradually increased as the city awoke, nor the rising tumult which came from

the adjacent building. Lost in the ecstasy of prayer, he was silent and absorbed.

The shaft of light through the open window grew in radiance; the rattle of chariot wheels upon the stones of the street aroused the prisoner from his reverie. The clamor was a part of the new experience which Judea was reluctantly receiving from Rome, and, though familiar to the ears which now heeded them, they disturbed the quiet of the other man's devotions. The worshipper drew himself slowly erect and, stepping to the window, looked out.

"Ho, my good Jew!" called the prisoner from his cell. "For the last hour thou hast been in the Elysian Fields, and thy visions should have taught thee charity. Light and air are too precious to be kept from this place, and thy form stops the fragrance of the morning. Again, I am athirst; canst thou get me drink?"

The Jew turned slowly from the window, exhibiting no sign of being startled or disconcerted. He was below the ordinary height in stature, but compact of form and well built, the muscles swelling at his neck. His head, carried high, was bald, and his nose sharply aquiline. The contour of his face was lost in a thick beard, which enveloped the lower part, but his eyes gleamed like stars, and there was in his bearing an invincible expression of resolution. He regarded the speaker with the calm interest of one accustomed to make an estimate of an adversary, and then the severity of his countenance relaxed in a smile.

"No man speaks of charity to me in vain, and I would bar nothing from thee, least of all the light and air of heaven. Thou hast a pleasant accent, and it brings a warm and familiar memory to my mind. What art thou called?"

"Not what I am, good Jew, because of the shortage

of human understanding. Else would Cæsar have cause to envy me."

"I asked thy name," said the man in the corridor, the smile growing upon his countenance.

"Indirectly thou didst, and I answered on my merits. But my name does not matter. If thou art in the Tribunal when the Governor questions me thou wilt hear me called many things which I am not. However," he continued, dryly, "I should not revile the lot of the virtuous, whose fate it is to be ever misunderstood."

The Jew said nothing in reply. He went quietly along the corridor, and shortly returned with a flagon of water, which he passed to the prisoner through the window of his cell. The captive drank it eagerly.

"The gods bless thee!" he ejaculated, heartily, when he had finished his draught. "Leave the flask. There is the semblance of a log sleeping here who may wish it when he awakes. Dost hear it snore?"

"I hear it," answered the other, quietly.

"It is like the wind from the Baltese woods from which he hails, and he sleeps beneath the displeasure of your authorities as calmly as in his native cave. I shall have trouble to restrain him when they lead us forth. To-day, I am told, the Tribunal sits."

"What hast thou done?" asked the Jew.

The prisoner sighed. It was a breath released half in merriment and not in grief, and a curious and incredulous look appeared in his eyes. He was as one amazed at his own conduct as he recalled his offence.

"A foolish thing," he said. "I was dry with the sands of thy desert, and thirsty in the memory of a better country. Time hung heavily upon my hands. I wandered to the market-place at thy gates, where I bought some red wine in a jug. The daughter of the knave who sold it was comely, and we of Rome are not respectors of thy people. The outcry that followed my

chaste salute brought out thy soldiers. With my servant I would have beaten them off and gone free but that some Arab horsemen rode their steeds over us. Had we not been taken unawares and refrained to use a weapon we had not been here a dull six days, with the prospect of a judgment from an enemy. Were I without, and my servant with me, I should be aboard the galleys in an hour. I learned some two days ago of their arrival."

"Thou hast a servant?" said the man in the corridor, musingly. "Then, since thou art of quality, there is little need to fear a judgment; thou wilt have a Roman quittance. I marvel that thou art here at all."

"That may be true," laughed the prisoner, "but thou shouldst observe that I have been slow to seek it. Felix hath some cause to remember me, and thou wilt hear my name in no patient humor when I am brought before him."

"Felix is gone," said the Jew. "It is the Roman, Festus, who is now Governor. He came with the galleys, and sits in authority to-day. Felix hath sailed ere this."

"Porcius Festus!" cried the prisoner, exultantly. "Now, by the gods, this is news, indeed! What art thou called, man? I may not speak my own name lightly, even with Felix gone, but I can put thine upon the altar when I return to the Imperial City."

"It is upon the altar already, Roman," replied the Jew, quietly, "where I pray God to keep it always. My name is Paul."

"Art a soldier? Thou bearest thyself as such."

"I have been a soldier."

"With Agrippa?"

"With Cæsar."

"Friend," said the prisoner, with solemn humor, "if thou canst place thyself where my arm can reach thee I will embrace thee as a brother. Thou wert an officer,

of that I'm sure. What was thy offence that I find thee now a Jewish jailer?"

"I am not a jailer; I am a prisoner, like thyself, and for two years have here awaited judgment. If I held any man at enmity, I have myself a grievance against Felix. I am a Jew, but I was born a Roman, at Tarsus."

"I know the place; fit to be born in only. It is Rome, good Paul, that truly makes a Roman. Would I were there to-day! Two years, dost thou say, in this place, and yet a prisoner? 'Tis strong treatment of a citizen, unless the offence may justify it, which with thee I doubt. What charge?"

"I am charged with speaking the truth, which surely is not an offence against the Roman law."

"Which surely it is," replied the prisoner, dryly. "I wonder not at thy imprisonment, but only that thou art alive. Try truth-speaking at Cæsar's court, and see how thou wilt fare."

"Hast heard the name of Christ?"

"Ay, many times. 'Tis a common one along the southern coast. What more?"

"Much more. I see thou dost not know it. I mean that Christ who is the Lord—Jesus, the Son of God."

The Roman was impressed by the manner of the other. He looked through the opening in his cell with a puzzled air, as though striving for the meaning of the deliberate significance of the speaker.

"Which god?" he asked, at length.

"There is but one—that God who is the Lord!"

"Good Paul!" said the Roman, leaning his arms against the door and resting his chin upon them as he looked forth. "Thou hast the advantage of me in both age and wisdom, for if thine eyes might pierce the darkness of this cell thou wouldst find no gray hairs in my head; but as a soldier of the Emperor I have travelled much. There are gods on every mountain, and I have

seen few countries that had not more than one. In Macedonia, of which thou must have heard, they have threescore above the crest of Mount Olympus; how many in the valleys I did not learn."

"Peace!" said Paul, sternly, extending his hand. "What is thy name, irreverent youth? Thou hast a good face, and, I suspect, a good name. Speak it, that I may place it in my prayers and seek for thee a knowledge of the true faith, which will give thee life eternal."

"My name is Fabyan. What riddle is all this?" exclaimed the prisoner, testily, his features clouding. "I swear to thee, the new faiths mock my patience, and, did I heed them, would make me poor. What with temples here and there, a begging Zeus and a hungry Isis, it is a marvel that the people eat. Pardon me, good Paul, but I have a right to anger. I paid money to a new god at the last Circus, and the lying Egyptian who defrauded me led me to a losing wager."

The expression upon the countenance of Paul remained fixed.

"Thou shouldst have a god whose votaries are not lying priests. It little benefits a man to have a god who will care for him only in this life. Thou hast a good face, but it will fade; a good form, but it will wither. Thy flesh may be the food of beasts, but thy soul shall be the Lord's!"

"I'll keep my flesh for a goddess, not a god; and the soul is a Syrian word, the meaning of which I do not know. But this life eternal—that hath a pleasant ring."

The Jew laughed softly, and a strange light burned in his eyes.

"Life eternal! How it doth appeal to the human longing! Death that follows the Roman armies; death that hath sown the desert with bones; death that waits upon all the sons of men; and life—a bubble in the sun! The one God is He who ordains all things, and who made

them; who, angered at the world and its wickedness, would have given our souls—that part of us which hopes and loves—to the shades. But His Son, pitying our fallen state and wretched future, came to earth, was born as Jesus Christ, lived and suffered, and was crucified, that we might live again—a sacrifice to appease His Father's wrath. Greater love hath no man than this, that He suffereth death for another."

The prisoner had listened in silence. Something in the manner of the speaker moved him profoundly.

"Well," he said, presently, "I will gladly hear thee further, even though it be upon a new faith and cost me money. There is a rhythm in thy speech that falls pleasantly upon mine ear. The life eternal—it seems that I have heard the words on Myrrha's lips."

"Myrrha," muttered the Jew, his head upon his breast, speaking softly and earnestly. "'Tis a beloved name to me."

"And to me, good Paul," said the prisoner, his eyes sparkling with a glad light. "Thy wife, perhaps?"

"Nay," and the gentle expression upon the Jew's face deepened into a frown, which grew severe and took on a suggestion of pain. "A sister, dear to my youth, and woven in all my better memories. I have been a Roman soldier, but I have much to forgive the Cæsars and their armies. She married a man of Sicily; there were two children, little Myrrha and a boy. They are lost, and, though I have preached to many people in many lands, God hath not given me trace of them."

"Lost?" said the prisoner. "Being a soldier, I can guess the meaning of thy words. They were lost in war?"

"In war," replied the Jew, sighing deeply. "But there is yet Rome—no matter; the story is a long one and would interest thee little. In his own good time, God maketh all things to come to pass."

Paul stepped back, and the Roman prisoner turned to arouse his sleeping companion.

"Up, Volgus! Awake! Here come the jailers with food."

A door at the end of the corridor was thrown open. There was a rattle of arms, as the guard approached. They were not Romans, but local soldiers of the jail; they came loosely forward, two slaves walking ahead and bearing immense platters of brass. Upon these huge loaves of bread were piled, and distributed at the different cells as the procession came down the prison hall.

The leader of the troop stopped where the Jew stood at the window.

"A greeting, Paul," he said, resting his spear upon the ground, and leaning back at ease against the wall. "Thou art not to remain much longer in doubt as to thy fate. The new Governor is here, and thou wilt be called shortly before him."

"Before the Roman?"

"Before the Tribunal. Herod Agrippa is present in Cæsarea to greet the Governor and his sister Berenice, who returned with Festus from Rome."

The Jew had become instantly attentive. His resolute nature showed itself in his fixed gaze.

"And the high-priest—with the lawyer?"

"Tertullus?"

"Ay?"

"All are present, with a mob in sympathy and witnesses by the score. They can convict thee of treason if they like. They will take thee back to the Holy City, and on Calvary, where they hung thy Master, they will crucify thee also; but in thy case the nails which pin thee to the boards are to be heated white, and Ananias boasts that a slender one shall be driven through thy belly."

A look of scorn appeared upon the noble face of the

Jew, and he met the inquiring gaze of the bantering jailer with unfaltering intrepidity.

"I am ready," he said, quietly. "I have no deeper prayer than that I shall be found worthy to follow in the footsteps of the Master."

The soldier laughed hoarsely.

"As to punishment?" he asked.

"As to punishment."

"'Tis not permitted us to speak against the priests," said the soldier, more gently, "but I have little love for Ananias. From my heart, I wish thee well."

"Jailer," called the Roman, from his cell, "hast thou a name?"

"Ay, and a good one. I am Samuel of the tribe of—"

"Nay," interrupted the prisoner, hastily. "I forgive thee the tribe, for which, perhaps, thou art not responsible; and for such a name, the gods pardon thy parents. Am I arraigned to-day?"

The soldier dropped the point of his spear through the aperture in the prison door, thrusting viciously in the dark.

"By the beard of Abraham, thou art! and the thick clown with thee; and if given to my custody after judgment thou wilt have more to pardon than my tribe."

"Forbear, my countryman," said Paul. "Gently to him who doth despitefully use thee; so sayeth the Teacher."

Ere the Jewish soldier had time to respond to the speech of his charge, the blast of a trumpet sounded without. Its echoes came ringing through the corridor of the prison, and the officer instantly marshalled his men.

"I am called to the Hall of Justice," he said. "Thou hast but time to eat and prepare for thy appearance before the Tribunal. Haste thee."

Signalling his men and motioning them forward with his spear, he led the way along the passage to where an arched doorway admitted them to the plaza separating the building from the stately hall beyond. The Jew looked after them in silence as they crossed the court-yard and defiled slowly into an entrance which admitted them to the rotunda of the Tribunal.

II

AN APPEAL TO CÆSAR

TWO hours later and the sun was high in the heavens. The bustle of the city neared the portals of the great Hall of Justice. Chariots thronged, as officers came from the vicinity of the barracks, and the wealthy citizens, in all the finery of holiday attire, accompanied them. Files of soldiers were drawn up in front of the various entrances to the palace, keeping the crowd at a respectful distance. It was a gala day in Cæsarea, and the tradesmen convenient to the locality of the palace had closed their shops in order to be present at the spectacle. The King was there, with his retinue, from Jerusalem. The high-priest, with his followers, had come also—they who had been for so long the bitter and relentless enemies of the apostate prisoner, who preached a doctrine as insulting to the religion of the Jews as it was a rebuke to the license of the temples of Greece and Rome. The Jew, Paul, was to be judged to-day, by the august consul who held in his mailed hand the power and authority of Cæsar. The square fronting the Hall of Justice was thick with the rabble, where rich and poor alike assembled to wonder at and do honor to the occasion.

A dozen trumpets sounded from the palace portals, and a file of Roman soldiers passed down the narrow street leading to the square, erect, stern, and deliberate.

They brought a sense of awe to the peaceful and home-loving Hebrews whom they had conquered, in which was mingled both admiration and fear. The discipline of the

Imperial City, which followed its legions to its farthest provinces, prevented direct oppression of the inhabitants, and the soldiers were not unkindly to the populace. The relationship was severe, but unmixed with cruelty if order was maintained and submission proffered. The Roman military governor, a sycophant at court, was a ruler abroad, and maintained the dominion of the empire with justice, if with firmness. The disposition of the Latin, even at this period, harmonized well with that of the gentler Hebrew. Both were in a measure Oriental, the one martial and musical as the other was poetic. To the eyes of the Jewish maiden the noble proportions of the soldiers of Cæsar were irresistible, while their free good-nature and their rude though superior humor made them popular customers with the Jewish tradesmen. In their hours of relaxation they mingled freely with the inhabitants of the city, and distributed the spoils which they had gathered in foreign countries with a lavishness that brought prosperity to the local marketplace.

Within the great building of justice the scene was animated. At the various doors, wide and open to the light and air, a Roman soldier, with a Jewish spearsman as a companion, stood sentry-like on either side. Minor officials kept the crowd away from the raised platform in the back, which was surmounted by a crimson dais, the curtains of which were swept aside and confined by heavy cords with silver tassels. A broad seat, reared as a throne, was reached by three steps, upon which was laid a rich Syrian rug. To the rear was the entrance to an inner chamber wherein the judges made ready for their appearance, and at these portals of distinction another guard of mingled Roman and Jewish soldiers was grouped in martial order. Rome, considerate of the sensitive nature of its conquered province, allowed its patrician class some semblance of authority.

In a corner of the hall, waiting with an air of eagerness and expectancy, was a gathering of priests, all in their robes of office. About them stood their attendants, sharing the excitement of their masters, murmuring nervously, and pulling at the long, curled beards, anointed and perfumed, that fell over the rich vestments in which they were clad. The throng waited with growing restlessness and impatience. Near at hand, men and women were mingled in indiscriminate disorder, gesticulating violently, and loud in the discussion of the coming audience.

The Governor delayed his appearance, but the order had been given to bring in the prisoners, and along the corridor which led to the jail the noise of their approach was distinctly audible, growing louder as they neared the chamber. Without, the cry of the fruit-venders rose on the morning air, and boys carrying water-jugs pressed through the crowd, beyond the entrance-way, to minister to the throng within the hall.

A hush fell upon the assembly as the prisoners entered. They were the centre of a vast and concentrated gaze. Curiosity, hate, and anticipation were all expressed, for the chief culprit who was to appear before the Tribunal was one who had long outraged the religion of Palestine, and who, in defiance of the synagogue, had preached the doctrine of the Nazarene — the Nazarene whom they hated, and who had perished upon the cross before the eyes of hundreds who were now present to destroy his follower. The chief priest of Jerusalem was there as his accuser, with the scribes of the Synagogue. The Holy City should see another martyrdom, not as cruelly tragic, but no less welcome to the thirsty throng that craved with Oriental eagerness the picturesque agony of one nailed, bleeding and fainting, to the cross. They had such spectacles in Rome; Athens could boast an amphitheatre, and here at Cæsarea the new Circus was

shortly to be dedicated by the gladiators; but for Jerusalem was this victim, whom they had learned to hate, and they had come to demand his blood.

The silence which had followed the uproar now became a murmur, and this deepened again into a storm of cries as the prisoners took their places. But the tumult subsided quickly before the reared spears of the Roman guards, who now enjoined order. There were but three, the Jew, Paul, upon whom the crowd gazed hungrily, Fabyan, and Volgus, termed his servant, now standing humbly to his rear. The Jew looked boldly upon the threatening multitude, his compact form erect and noble, his robe thrown aside to make free his length of bared right arm. The perspiration glistened upon his smooth forehead, but his eyes looked without fear into the frowning faces.

Seen now in the light, his companion, Fabyan, disclosed an attractive person. He was tall and straight, with a form lithe and muscular. His brief confinement had taken the bronze from his features, but he showed a soldier in every lineament. His skin was shining from his morning ablutions, and, with his attire arranged for his appearance before the Tribunal, he presented a figure of manly beauty which drew exclamations of admiration from the women. The person of his servant was scarcely less interesting to the curious throng. He was a man of enormous stature. His brow was low, and his eyes large and set far apart; white teeth gleamed from between his thick lips. He swung himself into place with the ease of a great beast, his oaken arms clasped at his chest, gazing about him with the freedom of his master, his face expressing good-natured wonder at the situation in which they found themselves.

Fabyan looked also upon the multitude. A smile wreathed his lips as he bent his head slightly forward and spoke in a low tone to his companion. The men of

the crowd nearest him observed his contempt, and shook their clinched hands towards him.

"A loving throng!" he whispered audibly to Paul. "Thy friend, the high-priest, I think, from the tender glance he fixes on thee? If I had my sword and the permission of the Governor I might arrange for a new Synagogue at Jerusalem by a whole host of corpses here."

A smile appeared upon the good-humored countenance of Volgus, as he grunted his approval of his master's words.

"I should not need a sword," he muttered.

"An ex-gladiator, Paul," said Fabyan, nodding his head lightly towards his follower. "A freedman attached to my uncle's household, whom I brought with me here when I came about a small affair of state. The smell of these jackals offends him. Do not let them fright thee. I shall stand thy friend."

"And I shall remember," replied Paul, himself smiling. "In the name of Christ, whose servant and apostle I am, I promise to stand thine."

A murmur again arose from the assembly. There was a movement behind the throne, and the soldiers fell aside. From the inner chamber came the Roman Governor, while to the rear, with head lowered in servile and submissive homage, walked the Jewish King. Following the two was a woman of unusual beauty.

"Berenice," the whisper ran from mouth to mouth, "the King's sister," as the spear-heads were lowered in salute.

A silver band encircled her brow, behind which were gathered masses of dark hair, and above her forehead gleamed a diamond star. Her flowing silken robes were of Roman fashion, and as they draped about her the soft material revealed, rather than concealed, a faultless form, which had the voluptuous grace of an Eastern dancer. Although a Princess of the Jewish court, she

had sojourned of late at the Imperial City, and had but just returned upon the galleys with the Governor, Festus.

They seated themselves with slow and stately ceremony, unheeding the uplifted arms and the single shout of welcome. The Roman Governor sat erect, with the haughty bearing of a potentate, while Herod Agrippa, sweeping his purple robes about his sandalled feet, looked with solemn majesty over the assembly. The eyes of Berenice answered the curiosity of the crowd, looking boldly upon it with the gaze of one accustomed to command. They were as dogs to these powers of fate, sitting so high above them. Then she bent her head to whisper softly into the ear of the Roman Governor, who sat between herself and her brother. Her words directed his attention to the bearing of the Jew, who looked intently upon them, and then her gaze rested upon the person of the Roman prisoner. Her color changed, the blood mounting to her white cheek.

"What is it?" asked the Governor, noting the surprise upon her face.

Her hand fell upon his shoulder, and, answering her touch, he looked also upon the prisoner.

"Fabyan Amici!" he cried. "Is it thou?"

The Roman stepped forward, while the crowd was silent and awed. He bowed low to the lady upon the throne, and then stood erect as his hand saluted the Governor.

"Hail, my Festus!" he exclaimed. "Right glad I am to see thee!"

"What is this?" cried the Roman Governor, his eyes darting lightnings. "A Roman tribune in Jewish custody!"

"My friend of the spear-head," said Fabyan, looking to where the officer of the Jewish guard leaned, with blanched countenance, against the doorway. "The poor

man of the tribe of— But I forgave him his tribe. In mercy, I may forget that his name is Samuel."

The brow of Herod Agrippa darkened. He looked angrily about, and the Jewish officer fell back before his threatening eyes.

"I am blameless," said the King, in a low voice, to Festus. "No word of this was brought to me, and Felix was here. I shall investigate it."

"'Tis I who shall investigate it, and punish it, too," answered Festus, with growing wrath. "What means this, my Lord Tribune?"

"A jest," said Fabyan, "and scarcely worth thine anger. I had a private mission to Judea—and Felix never loved me. I did not appeal to him when I had offended against the Jewish laws. Perhaps the noble Berenice may divine the cause."

"I shall not try," laughed the lady, speaking boldly, with aristocratic indifference, unmindful of the throng. "Those of Rome who know thy recklessness will never marvel at anything thou dost. It is sufficient that we see thee now."

"I shall look to this anon," said the Governor. "Stand by, my Fabyan, until the audience is over, and then come with us to the palace. And Volgus," he continued, with a smile—"his ancient company would laugh to see him herded by a guard of Jewish jailers."

The giant smiled grimly; he turned a look of contempt upon his captors, and, obedient to the gesture of his master, took a position near the Roman guards. His eyes rested with amused malevolence upon the face of the unhappy Samuel, who sought to hide himself behind a pillar.

"I have a word for the Jew, Paul," said Fabyan to the Governor. "He is Roman born."

Festus turned his eyes upon the motionless figure which stood before the throne, and Fabyan, stepping

upon the platform, bent his head for a whispered word to the lady, Berenice. She received it with a blush, as unusual as it was marked, and those who knew her at the Imperial Court would have wondered to see the crimson upon her cheek. She pushed him laughingly aside as she noted her brother's eyes upon her.

"This Paul is a Jew, most noble Governor," cried the chief priest, coming forward. "He is under the judgment of Felix, your august predecessor, for having offended against the Jewish law. The gracious Felix was not one to overlook a breach of the Jewish peace, in the light of its reliance upon the Imperial government. This Paul hath desecrated the Temple, preached schism in the Synagogue, and, although he hath long lain in confinement under the displeasure of Felix, it is our petition that he be taken to Jerusalem for trial by the Jewish law."

"A fair prospect for a fair hearing," observed Fabyan, looking at the venomous faces of the priests. "He would be condemned by inference. By Mars! he deserves something better."

"He deserves nothing but punishment, most noble Roman."

"Retaliate, good Paul," suggested Fabyan. "Ask him his tribe!"

"Peace, Fabyan!" said Festus.

"He is a Jew!" howled the priest.

"And were that an offence," said Festus, "I might hold guilty this great King upon my right, and if such blood be criminal, how is it with this beautiful lady who sits beside me? What more?"

"'Tis not an offence, great Roman," said the Jewish lawyer, "if one so born esteems it. But a Jew should hold to Jewish rule, and the Governor, Felix, had agreed that the accused, being a Jew, should answer in the Jewish courts. So runs the bond between the Imperial City and Judea."

"He speaks the truth," said the King, softly. "So Felix should have held."

"So have not I, as yet," answered Festus, firmly, "nor shall my judgment rest on any precedent of Felix. Stand forward, Paul!"

The Jew stepped closer to the throne. Throwing his robe aside and placing his arm across his chest, he bowed silently.

"We have heard of thee," continued Festus, "and this noble lady hath an interest in the strange doctrines thou art said to preach. Thy Roman plea shall serve thee well, despite this deputation from Jerusalem, if thy words speak a Roman's faith."

"Hath Rome a faith?" replied Paul, speaking for the first time. His voice was deep and melodious.

"Truly," said the Governor, looking at him in surprise. "All the world hath learned it from the sword. Loyalty to the Emperor, obedience to the gods, and the dominance of the Roman people."

"I do not preach it," said the prisoner, boldly.

"Hear him, noble Festus!" cried the priest. "He speaks no Roman faith, nor any faith that man should heed. He is a sorcerer of Tarsus, a defiler of the Temple, and an apostate to his people. Yield him up to us!"

Festus was silent, and Paul faced his accusers calmly. He observed the attitude of Fabyan towards the sister of the King, and now regarded him intently. He noticed the emotion which the lady betrayed, and saw beneath the seemingly careless demeanor of the twain the evidence of an old companionship. He was thoughtful, even under the significance of his surroundings, until his attention was recalled to himself by the words of the Governor.

"These are strong accusations made against thee, which thine own language serves to aid," said Festus, sternly. "How dost thou answer?"

"I have a mission," replied Paul; "else would I return most willingly to Jerusalem and confront my accusers as before, even in the presence of the mob. I said so much to Felix, as perhaps the King doth know."

Agrippa waved his hand with a repellent gesture. "Speak not of me," he said, angrily. "Were I to judge thee we should have few words."

"Thou art not of the tribe of his kingship, good Paul," observed Fabyan, coolly. "Said I not, my Festus, that he was a Roman?"

"Thou sayest many things in thy haste," replied the Governor, testily.

"I shall punish him, thus," said Berenice, and she struck him coquettishly with her fan of peacock feathers. Then she bent her head to listen, as Paul continued:

"The finger of him whom I serve points to Rome, and not to Jerusalem. As He leadeth me, I go. It was not my blessed privilege to know my beloved Master, whom they slew, except as He came to me bathed in the glory of Heaven, after He was dead."

"After He was dead!" echoed Festus. "What speakest thou, man?"

"Hear how he lies!" shouted the priest. "Fantastic blasphemer!"

"Silence!" enjoined the Roman Governor, sternly. "Speak soberly to me."

"I am of the Temple," was the answer in sullen rebellion. "I am the chief priest."

"An unfortunate office—if it make thee insolent," said Fabyan, dryly. "A Roman Governor may send kings to Pluto."

"I know not Pluto," replied the priest, angrily. "I speak to the Governor—not to thee."

"Note his demeanor," laughed Fabyan. "Dost hear him, my Festus?"

"Peace!" replied the Governor, with a smile, as the priest ground his teeth. "Say on, Paul."

The manner of the Jew changed. He put forth his hand with a gesture of command. He spoke slowly, but his words fell distinctly upon the silence. His voice was the breath of authority, and his bearing was full of a noble majesty.

"Thou wert not born, most noble Festus, at the time of which I speak, although thy father lived, and many are here who will recall it. But it was at the time of the new star, of which thou hast heard, that there came to this country and to all the world a Child from heaven. He was born, near Bethlehem, in the manger of a stable. The Jewish records had long foretold the coming of such a King, but few knew that the Child was He. Great was the mission which He bore from God, and thrice blessed His embassy. He came from heaven to redeem the world from sin, and save all men from death."

"'Tis a pity His mission was a failure," said Festus, with a tolerant smile, "since His followers continue to die most readily. He died Himself, did He not?" and his eyes watched the Jew curiously.

"Ay!" cried Paul, lifting his arms, while his voice rang through the hall. "He died upon the cross. A death most pitiful, since He died for me, and thee, and all mankind, forever. For in that death He suffered for all men, rising Himself, when He had done this service, in promise of the fact that we should live beyond the grave."

"*We?*" asked Festus, in surprise, leaning forward and touching his breast with his finger. "Dost thou mean *me?*"

"He died for Cæsar, and for all mankind," said Paul, his hand yet uplifted. "But that mankind might merit heaven and the life of which He spoke He preached a life on earth as well. 'Tis little wonder that those who heard Him listened; such words have not before been

heard on earth; He spoke of charity for all mankind, and love."

The Roman Governor turned his eyes upon the fair figure at his side. They held a tender light, but it did not awaken the blush which his friend had excited. She answered his look with one of boldness, and nodded her head towards the Jew.

"A pleasant doctrine, Paul," said Festus, "which we already acknowledge. Venus hath many temples."

"The love He preached surpasseth the love of woman," said Paul, his voice grown deeper and his stern features relaxed. "'Tis the love of man for men—that love which giveth pity for our tears and wipeth them away, which comforteth the broken heart, and in the darkness of the night points out the stars, that teaches pity for the poor and weak, and begs of man forgiveness of his enemies."

"A praiseworthy doctrine, but not a Roman's," said Festus. "'Tis suited to the Jews—a gentle people. I marvel not that thou hast angered the priest, since thou hast stolen his best functions; and I think me, Agrippa," and here he turned towards the sullen monarch at his side, "if thou wilt heed him ours will be an easy rule."

"An easy rule for all, since Christ Himself shall govern," said Paul. "Not with the crown and sceptre of the world, for they are baubles. His kingdom lieth in the hearts of men."

"Cæsar will not scent treason there," said Fabyan. "'Tis the kingdom of Berenice whose province he usurps."

"The man speaks well," said Festus. "What more?"

"I am a Roman citizen," said Paul, "and have borne arms for the empire. Leading my men to persecute the Christians at Damascus, the Lord of heaven appeared to me, even He who died upon the cross and rose again. My soldiers heard the thunder which struck us down,

and were lost in the darkness which enveloped us; but they heard not the voice which spoke to me. Mine eyes, blinded then in the flesh, were opened in the glory which overcame me, as God hath been pleased to open them again in the flesh. Since then I have preached the word which came to me. It is the word of life for those who heed it."

"'Tis passing strange," said Berenice, awed by the manner of the Jew. "I think him honest. May he not speak to us in private?"

Festus nodded, turning his eyes upon Paul, who continued:

"I am a Roman citizen, most noble Festus. I have preached in many cities, and would go to Rome. I appeal to Cæsar."

"'Tis granted," said Festus, frowning at the enraged priests, who murmured at his decision. "Thy words have a pleasant sound, but they are meaningless to a man who wears a sword. A soldier doth not forgive his enemies, and the power of Rome lieth in war, not peace. Much learning hath taught thee poetry, but it hath made thee mad."

"Cometh he not to us?" exclaimed the chief priest, angrily.

Festus arose and motioned to the centurion.

"Put this rabble out," he said.

A cry of rage burst from the deputation. In this the populace joined. Relying upon the presence of the priests and the power of the King, they rushed forward.

A smile of scorn rested upon the handsome features of Fabyan as the Roman guard met the assault. With spear-heads locked together the soldiers thrust the throng back. Wild with rage, the priests incited the people further, urging them forward, and hoping that in the tumult the offending apostate might be slain. Fabyan descended the steps and placed himself by the prisoner,

and the great form of Volgus towered at his side. Berenice looked on with a countenance showing no fear, but glowing with interest, a sentiment which was shared by the Roman Governor.

"Enough!" cried Festus, at length, his voice ringing through the hall. "Silence, all!"

Agrippa also enjoined peace. Standing by the side of the Roman Governor, he motioned his soldiers to aid the Roman guard. This was unnecessary. The priests retired, baffled and beaten, and the crowd followed them from the building and into the street.

"Thou wilt be brought to the palace, Paul," said Festus, descending from the throne of state and speaking familiarly to the prisoner. "I shall commit thee to the custody of my centurion, Julius, until I can send thee to Rome. The noble Berenice would hear more of thy discourse, and it pleaseth me likewise. Meantime, my Fabyan, as we sit at wine I will hear of thy mission. The audience is over."

III

BERENICE

WHEN Festus had left the Hall of Justice accompanied by Herod Agrippa, Berenice, and Fabyan, he passed through the line of pillars which formed a corridor connecting the palace with the tribunal, and entered a marble court in octagon form, into which opened the various chambers of the structure. Here he dismissed his attending guard, and the Jewish King left him, retiring to his own apartments to make ready for the noonday meal. Berenice lingered for a further word with Fabyan, and then left also, smiling a farewell to the Governor. When they were alone, Festus seated himself upon the cushions of an ottoman between the columns of the court, and motioned Fabyan to a place beside him.

"Now for thy story," he said. "I am yet lost in wonder to find thee here, although, as Berenice would have it, we might expect anything of Fabyan. I missed thee at Rome on my return from Thessaly, and had not opportunity to learn from any of thy kinsmen where thou mightst be. I saw not thy good uncle, but in the gardens of the palace, from a portico which overlooked them, I had a glimpse of thy sweet cousins. With the noble Fulvia they had come to pay a visit of respect to Poppæa, and Nero himself observed them, directing my attention to their grace and beauty. As much as thou art a soldier thou mightst improve thy state, even though it keep thee from the wars. 'Tis a hard choice,

considering how beautiful is each; either might befit thee."

"And one might go from Britain to this place, by way of Egypt, and find their equals nowhere," replied Fabyan, warmly. "While I have loved them both, I have only the making of a poor husband in me. Perhaps I might tempt myself, were I worthy—but, no, we will speak of something else."

"Thy mission, then? What had Cæsar in these parts that he could not commit to Felix? By Mars! should he send another spying after me, I'd make a vacancy in his service."

"I am no spy, even upon Felix," laughed Fabyan. "My mission was a pretext. I had another purpose."

"In that event, I'll not question thee," said Festus. "We will speak of something else."

"'Tis not a matter that I would keep private—at least, from thee," said Fabyan. "Thou hast spoken of my cousins; Valentina is my cousin, but Myrrha is my uncle's slave."

"Is it so?" exclaimed Festus, in surprise. "I did not know of this."

"'Tis almost forgotten in Rome," replied Fabyan; "but, in truth, she was a captive, brought from the East when my uncle campaigned here with the legions of Claudius. She hath had a daughter's place and a daughter's love, but it is, as I have said. Youth hath its memories, however; there was a brother, the remembrance of whom her mother, while she lived, kept green in the child's heart. She scarcely knew how her father died, and dared not ask my uncle; such is her gentleness. He would have her forget that she is related to any but himself. Her people are of Judea, and she had often mentioned it. I knew it weighed upon her heart. I consulted a priest of Isis, and he told me a strange tale —that the brother was not dead, but lived under another

name, and would yet be restored to the sister who lamented him. It weighed upon my Myrrha as her solicitude weighed upon me; and, in pursuance of the foolish vision, I ventured a journey in search of news. I would I could take home with me some report of good cheer."

"It was a gallant journey, after all," replied Festus, smiling; "and does thee honor. If thou hast not been successful and feel the need, all my power shall aid thy search."

"I came only upon chance, scarcely crediting the lying priest," answered Fabyan. "Nor did I tell the cause. 'Tis a natural longing which my sweet cousin holds."

"And it is natural that thou shouldst give her sympathy," laughed Festus. "Ah, well! I regret thy failure, but time leaves few traces in the wake of war. When wilt thou return?"

"At the first sailing. If thou shouldst send back the galleys, I will take passage there."

"They go to the south coast," said Festus.

His brow clouded. He looked moodily along the marble flags, and up at the arched roof, through the tessellated openings of which the sunlight fell upon them in a golden shower.

"I would I could return with thee," he continued. "Truly, glory hath its limitations, and the governor of a province is often the prisoner of his office. There are those next to Cæsar who live in such pleasure that, in comparison, the grandeur of Tiberius was as a peasant's hovel. I have earned a stay in Rome, but 'tis thou, detached from politics and a soldier merely, who art free to serve thy pleasure. How camest thou in prison?"

"An accident of which I need not speak, and, having fallen in a brawl, I was ashamed to have it known at

Rome. Felix would have reported it, so I let the Jews keep me for a time in secret. Hadst thou not come, I had arranged to bribe the jailers and escape."

Festus laughed jovially.

"Felix would have told thine uncle, thy cousins, the Emperor, and each idler and lounger at the court. But let it pass. He's gone, I trust, to new honors and a barbarian's sword. I liked him not."

"Few like him," observed Fabyan, "but, in justice, that is no measure of his merit. I commend him, with thee, to a barbarian's sword."

"This Paul," said Festus, musingly, after a pause, "he inciteth a strange interest. I feel it the more, coming as I do to govern a strange people—a people of eagle nose and eye. 'Love thine enemies.' What of Berenice, who is not mine enemy, and Felix, of whom we have spoken? His religion would set at odds the Roman court."

"And Nero, of tender heart. His mother would be alive yet to admonish him; and Britannicus—"

"Take care," cried Festus, warningly. "These Corinthian columns, albeit reared on Hebrew sands, can carry echoes to Rome."

It was Fabyan now who laughed.

"The Jew is not cautious," he said. "He might abandon his appeal in wisdom, though if he go to Rome I shall stand his friend. With his bold bearing and free speech I can see him in the arena among the lions. What were the latest fashions at the court? How goes the Emperor's health? I had abandoned the court prior to my coming, but a day out of Rome is a year lost in life. Nero had quarrelled with Seneca; hath he forgiven him? There is your true philosopher! who knoweth the wisdom of the ancient Egyptians, and the winning chariot at the Circus Maximus. 'Tis beautiful to see him feel the muscles of a boxer, thinking upon his

wager, discoursing meanwhile of the evils which came to the Greeks through gaming."

"I've an idea will make thee first at court upon thy return," said Festus. "Thou mightst arrange an issue between Seneca and the Jew, and have Nero to judge it with a poem. Then he might give both to the lions as a fitting climax; he hath long coveted Seneca's possessions."

They laughed again.

"I would thou couldst remain awhile," continued Festus. "The days will be dull."

"Thou canst spare me; thou hast Berenice."

The brow of Festus darkened once more.

"She returns to Rome," he said. "The glamour of the court is over her, and my duty keeps me here. She goes with the first vessel; I think the treacherous and fox-eyed Agrippa abets her. He seeks to keep an influence next to Cæsar, and when Felix came to power here I know that Berenice smiled upon him. Marked you closely this Jewish King? Did I think he persuaded her, Cæsar should learn of him dead in the palace cellar, and I would make it hard to find the soldier that could be charged with the deed."

"Softly," said Fabyan. "If that be thy temper, my Festus, drink carefully of wines in this thirsty country of the desert. Otherwise it may not be Agrippa dead in a cellar, but a Roman Governor dying of a fever in the palace. Keep a good physician near thee."

"I'll keep a sword close at hand. I would I might go back to Rome with thee."

He arose from his seat, stretching his arms at length, and looking moodily about the splendid hall.

" 'Tis a prison, after all," he continued, "if one keeps it without friends. I have the gods to console me, Greek and Roman, and I may look into the religion of these Hebrews; it affords them at least the satisfaction of

excitement. Didst thou note how they hate this Paul? 'Tis a pleasure to be able to feel so deeply on so small a subject. Agrippa tells me they crucified his Master, under Pilate. Who would credit these Jews with talent? A diversion as pleasant as the amphitheatre, if one have taste. Suggest it to Nero."

"Nero hath a genius of his own, and 'tis not my province," replied Fabyan, gloomily. "I sicken at the games."

"What, and thou a soldier! one who has waded in blood above thy sandals. Say it to Tigellinus."

"I would say it to Jove if I could see Tigellinus pitched from the podium into the arena. He hath the temper of a lion and the pity of a jackal."

"And Cæsar's favor, which we should remember if we value our households. Come, I must away. Take all liberty. There is a Roman bath, with Greek attendants, in the north wing."

Fabyan arose, also, and stood until Festus had departed. Turning, himself, to leave the court, he was startled by a suppressed laugh. He stared about the great hall curiously, and then the face of the King's sister looked at him from behind a marble column.

"You see," she said, coming forward, "I have watched thee. It is a woman's privilege—a deceitful politician and an errant soldier."

He smiled upon her gently, waving her to the seat that he had just vacated.

"Nay," she said, with a glance in the direction of the portal through which Festus had disappeared. "The palace hath other chambers less free of access. Come."

"I have a memory," he said. "Thou knowest that; and yet, isolated, far from home, and in a land where the Roman gods give no protection, without discretion, in spite of my sad experiences, I would follow thee to Hibernia."

She laughed.

"Where is it?"

"To the northwest of Rome; it is the farthest land on earth, where the edge of the world rests upon the back of the Olympian elephants. It is the winter land of Jupiter, where the abyss is bottomless. There Venus dwelleth, in a blue cloud fringed with snow."

"Venus! How the thoughts of a Roman soldier go to her! It is strange that the Greeks permitted Jupiter some other wife. She hath a thousand statues. I have seen as many; yet I know other women with forms as fair."

"I know but one," he said.

She smiled again, and led the way from the court. He followed, and they passed through an arched doorway leading to the wing of the palace in which were the apartments of the women. They came shortly to an octagon garden, where a seat, backed by clusters of rose-bushes, looked towards the sea. The spot afforded a view of the new quay, upon which scores of workmen were dark spots at their labor; beyond, the galleys rose and fell upon the long swell of the waters.

"Wilt thou return to Rome?" she asked, when they were seated.

"Ay," he answered; "my mission here is ended, and a ship sails but shortly. So Festus hath said; and thou heardst him state that Paul should go also, in the custody of the centurion Julius. I have promised to befriend him at court."

She looked at him archly from the corner of her eyes; her hands played with the roses he had plucked and thrown into her lap.

"I, too, am to return to Rome."

He laughed, looking her now full in the face, his hand falling upon her white wrist, and remaining there. His fingers did not tremble as in other days. "Hast thou

forgotten?" he said. "Thou sayest it with so coy an air, with so gentle a voice, that I should start with surprise. Oh, joy! I should cry, to think that we shall journey together!"

She drew her hand away, her black eyes blazing. All the vanity of the Oriental woman, hurt to the heart, looked from her countenance; her lips quivered at his careless tone of banter.

He looked upon her, also, with such wonder in his eyes that her rage was stayed.

"And thou wouldst startle me," he said, "with this celestial information; yet thou stoodst behind the pillar next to Festus and heard him tell me, in the gloomiest of tones, thou wert to go. A deceitful politician and an errant soldier are scarce a match for the sister of a king who hath lived at the Roman court."

Every trace of vexation vanished from her brow. Her eyes beamed with another light.

"I heard it not," she said. "No word of it. Did Festus tell thee?"

He pursed his lips in a low whistle—a signal of man's doubt of woman since the dawn of story.

"Nay," she urged. "I heard it not; I speak truly."

"When thou speakest truly," he replied, "I will break my sword; I will give mine armor to my servants; I will follow thee with a peacock fan, the most slavish of thy worshippers. I had forsworn thy service, and thought myself from under the spell of thine eyes, but—I pledge myself."

"'Tis thy place," she said, "and thou shalt have the fan. As we return to Rome I will teach thee thy duties through the voyage. Remember thy words."

"I do remember," he said, arising, "that it is the hour to dine. At the table we are to listen to the Hebrew, Paul."

She observed the change in his voice, but she did not

notice the gloom which settled upon him. Had she done so she would have been at a loss for the cause. She cast a spell upon all men who came within the circle of her influence. Reared at the profligate court of Herod, her girlhood had been a series of vanities and conquests, and Rome had little to teach her in the wiles and arts of her sex. Even Poppæa had trembled for her place with Nero until the shrewd nature of the Jewish woman had noted the danger of exciting her anger. Tigellinus himself had sued for her favor. Fabyan Amici had felt the spell, and felt it now; but an attachment, warm and sincere, that had taken possession of his life protected him. Berenice saw the effect of her old power, and, with the quick perception of her sex, observed him pale and color by turns under her smile or frown. But he held himself strongly, though conscious of the fascination, and refrained from any overt act. He was loyal and true to himself, but he was human; and, while gallant and a courtier, his proud nature kept in subjection the passion with which she moved him. She had looked upon him as her proudest conquest, sought his subjection with all the force of her coquetry and beauty, and now, when he was once more within her influence, she did not propose to yield him up.

He was to-day conscious of her power, and could foresee the intimacy that threatened his peace of mind in the voyage that lay before them. How to resist it he knew not, but he was still resolved. There was in his heart the memory of an affection that he valued above all things, and he would have died before surrendering a hope that filled his being. The nobility of his nature was struggling with the vigor of his blood, and the contest unnerved him.

"Shall we go in?" he asked, finally.

She gave him her hand with a graceful gesture, and together they left the peristyle.

IV

A ROMAN EVENING

THE family of the Amici was the most patrician in Rome. It was influential as far back as the chronicles gave record, and it had grown in power until, during the period that marked the beginning of the empire, the Cæsars had come to regard it with distrust and jealousy. Its loyalty was not in question, but it was ambitious. Yet it was not a family to be estranged. Its members were strong in the senate and the army, revered by the populace and respected and esteemed by their order. During the reign of Claudius it had declined somewhat—pride, daring, high passion, and limitless ambition had diminished it in number—but now, in the time of Nero, it had renewed its grandeur and its star had reached its zenith. Its head was Lucius Amici, a general of the legions and a member of the senate. But he was not in favor at court. Poppæa, divorced of two husbands, former mistress of the soldier Burrhas and (gossips of the court dared whisper) Tigellinus, now the spouse of Nero, hated him; still more, she hated the matron Fulvia, his wife, whose character, by noble contrast, reproached her own. And the hatred of Poppæa was blighting; to those of less renown than the family of the Amici, it was deadly. Fabyan Amici, a tribune, and nephew of Lucius, did not share this hatred of his family. He had won the good-will of Nero by commending his verses, and the affection of Poppæa by commending her beauty. The Empress was as vain

as she was fair, and a courtier of the grace of Fabyan, who could make a skilful compliment, was always welcomed to her presence. She admired his handsome person and was delighted by his wit. He had, also, a certain honesty, which gave his praise weight; and, differing from the more reckless members of the court in a sedateness and deliberation which had grown upon him of late, his judgment was held in more esteem, and he was valued accordingly.

The house of Lucius Amici was built upon the slope of the Pincius, remote from the Imperial palace. The favorites of the profligate court found fault with this, and saw a sinister purpose in such a desire for seclusion. In truth, Lucius Amici sought to set himself without the neighborhood of the court circle, of which he disapproved, and to shun, for himself, and more particularly for his young daughters, a proximity dangerous to controversy and ribald observation. But its location was one of dignity, and at its dedication Nero, with all his train, attended a feast at its tables.

The villa in question was one of the noblest of its class. A wide veranda extended the length of its front, unobstructed by any balustrade. This was sheltered by a roof of marble, supported by a row of Corinthian pillars, the base of each affording space at the corners for copper urns filled with flowers. From these urns a vine grew upward, twining about the pillars and extending along the cornice, drooping in rich clusters between the columns about the chains of hanging silver lamps. The marble flags of the veranda extended immediately to the greensward, which inclined gently downward to the dwelling, to a flight of stone steps leading to the street below. To the rear of the veranda was the entrance-hall, a large chamber built in the prevailing octagon form and profusely ornamented with marble statues in Greek and Roman design. The

Grecian model prevailed, and, while Rome could not rival Athens in the more delicate domain of the arts, the hand that grasped the sword and ruled the world did not want in vain its dearest products. From the entrance-hall, through doorways marked by high arches, access was had to the various apartments of the house.

A certain high reserve marked these dwellings of the rich—a stately pomp, in keeping with the austerity of the owners, and that esteem in which they held themselves above the inferior and plebeian classes.

Evening had come, but the Italian twilight lingered. Below, and within the view, were the distant streets of the city, and, beyond, the silver sheen of the Tiber. Along the thoroughfares throngs were yet discerned, massing in the open forums or gathered about the wine-shops at the corners. Upon the veranda, enjoying the soft air and interested in the animated scene below, sat the owner of this august establishment. He was a man of commanding appearance. His gray hair, brushed back from his forehead, revealed a countenance serene and intelligent. His white toga, with its broad band of red, was clasped at the shoulder by a jewelled buckle, and upon his wrist was a massive bracelet set with precious gems. Near him was Fulvia, his wife, handsome in spite of her fifty years, and by her side two girls of striking beauty. The glory of the departed day seemed to have lingered with their features, and the roses, whose scent filled the air, seemed to have touched their cheeks with the color of their own loveliness. The radiance of a perfect health was about each, and that divine charm of youth that laughed from their eyes and crowned their twenty years.

One was Valentina, the daughter of Lucius, and the other Myrrha, her sister by adoption. With them was Paulo Attilius, a youthful patrician of wealthy family, and opposite the young man, and occupying a

seat of especial prominence, a guest who would have attracted attention in any assembly. His countenance was fascinating, though obscure, handsome, and singularly imposing, but behind its brow of marble whiteness, a region of doubt and, possibly, dread; his features were thoughtful, suggesting both learning and deep power, while his eyes were bright with a singular and piercing light. His name was Brabano, and he was physician to Poppæa. His costume accorded with his rank and reputed wealth; his toga, of deepest black, was of Egyptian silk, its folds secured by jewels that sparkled with amazing lustre. Two additional persons completed the group, one a portly man of about sixty years of age, Regnus, a wealthy merchant and brother to Fulvia, the other, Volgus, leaning against a pillar of the veranda with the easy attitude of one who, if a menial, was yet a privileged person, confident of the forbearance and kindliness of his superiors. He was a freedman, formerly a slave of Lucius, late a successful gladiator in the arena, and now a licensed servant of the household.

The others sat at a table, and for a time maintained a silence—that silence which follows an abundant repast at which conversation has flowed as freely as the wine. All were looking towards the city; its figures were fading in the waning light, and along the streets the pale torches were bursting into tiny and intermittent flames.

"Look," said Brabano, extending his hand and pointing with his white, jewelled finger. "Is it not a splendid sight? There are the Gaul, the German, the Egyptian, the Celt, and my own ancient people without number. What a city! Rome may well be called eternal, since she draweth her sustenance from all the earth!"

"'Tis a sight to make a patriot," observed Lucius, "and a soldier, too. But we must mingle caution with pride, since among the number are those who threaten to destroy us. Rome is not impregnable to enemies at

home. It is an infamous thing that a foreign sect among the Jews should seek to imperil all our lives. Nero is certain of this design to fire the temples. He has especially enjoined upon me the frustration of this plot, but my progress at detection is slow. I have learned, however, that it is the impulse of a new religion fostered in Judea—the offspring of jealousy and hate."

"Caution is well; it is as much the virtue of a soldier as courage," said Brabano, slowly. "But I give little credit to these rumors. Since they interest the Emperor, we may tolerate them with patience, although I do not marvel at thy ill success. These new religions are difficult to treat with, and the hate engendered by their priesthoods may lead to any crime; but the destiny of Rome is invincible. Were the flames to sweep her last vestige from the earth she would grow again, with redoubled strength and beauty. I have cast her horoscope."

"It is with the present Rome that I have to deal," replied Lucius, stirring uneasily. "I am alarmed. I know little of this sect except that it threatens to be dangerous. It is located among the poor wretches living beyond the Tiber, and their haunts are difficult of access."

"Dost thou, in truth, believe that they design to burn the city?"

"The Emperor thinks so, and that sufficeth."

"And hast thou apprehended none?"

"If my task had been so wholly barren, we might limit the games to the gladiators and the beasts. However, the Emperor may promise the people something of sport, although my captives are a feeble lot; I would I had the leaders in custody, for leaders there be. I have heard of one."

"What motives may they have?" asked Regnus.

"It is difficult to fathom the motives of the vile," replied his brother-in-law. "We need not seek them, since it is Nero's wish that the villains be apprehended. But they are robbers; they seek to fire the city that they may pillage thy kind in the turmoil."

"By the gods, I wish thee all success!" cried Regnus, heartily. "If such be their aim, thy commission is worth thy talents."

"I have said they are a poor foe," replied Lucius, "but even a poor foe may be dangerous with a torch in a crowded city. I know nothing of the inception of the conspiracy. The culprits are fanatics and traitors who have organized this sect to overthrow the state. They hate our worship of Isis. Their leader wishes power, and his followers wish plunder; in Judea he fomented a rebellion among the poorer classes by proclaiming himself a king. My spies tell me of him but poorly. He is one Christus, a Jew, of wondrous powers, as I learn, holding his followers under a spell. They conceal him with a strange fidelity, and thus far he hath escaped me."

The freedman Volgus, at the pillar, had listened, with something like a smile. He shifted his position to another and nearer column, but remained silent, as he watched with a respectful manner the countenance of Brabano.

The slaves had come upon the veranda with torches, and now lighted the silver lamps. In the entrance-hall a great globe was pendent from the roof; it shed its rays above a central fountain that scattered its cooling spray over a mass of foliage and flowers growing in vases about the margin of a circular pool, or basin, of marble directly under it. The light from the globe mingled with the rays of the hanging lamps, and bathed the hall and the portico in a gentle and golden splendor.

The face of the physician now expressed a growing

interest in the words of Lucius, an interest amounting to animation and almost excitement.

"Continue," he said, as his host paused. "What more of this Christus?"

"Naught more," answered Lucius, with some surprise. "As I have said, I can learn but little of him."

"I know of this, noble master," said Volgus.

"Thou? Of what?"

"This Christus, of whom thou speakest."

"Well," said Lucius, "what dost thou know?"

"'Tis a sect, as thou hast said, among the Jews," explained the freedman. "I know a boxer, a Thracian, named Selma, who fell into their hands. They came about the training-quarters and lured him to their meetings near the fish-market, and he quit the gladiators and went to preach their doctrine in Corinth. A good man spoiled for a bad purpose, perhaps; but they are as cunning as foxes, these Jews. This Christus was a Jewish poet, but he is dead."

"'Tis a relief to know it, although he has cheated the lions," said Lucius, with a sigh. "I have observed that when the leaders die a conspiracy soon ends. These culprits shall shortly be in the hands of my soldiers, and after the games there will be none left to threaten Rome with fire. Did Christus die here?"

"Nay, good master," said Volgus, with a glance at the glittering eyes of Brabano. "He was never here. The Jew, Paul, who travelled, as thou knowest, from Cæsarea with my master, Fabyan, is his priest, and can speak of little else than his religion. I heard him say that Christus was slain, years ago, in Palestine."

"What is all this!" exclaimed Lucius, impatiently. "Have my officers deceived me?"

"Comfort thyself, good Lucius," said Brabano, smoothly. "I know of this right well, since the name reveals the story. This Christus, or Christ, was a noble

of the Jews, slain during the consulship of Pilate, a governor of Judea, in the time of Tiberius. These people are his followers merely."

"His followers—what was he?"

"He was—" and Brabano paused—"a strange man of strange powers. I scarcely allow myself to think of him otherwise. A contemplation of his story is dangerous to a man of my philosophy."

"I'll tell thee, noble uncle," cried Myrrha, speaking for the first time, and in an eager voice. "He was a god."

"A demi-god," said Valentina, with a laugh. "We'll not give to the Jews more than we admit to the Greeks."

"'Tis strange, we have no gods among the Romans," said Paulo, who had listened without interest to the conversation.

"Yes," laughed Valentina. "Since the conquerors of the earth have no affinity for heaven, I am sceptical of these foreign deities. A Jewish god must be a poor creature."

"This Christus was poor enough," observed Brabano, musingly. "He was the son of a carpenter of Nazareth, although, tradition says, of noble blood."

"And yet, I have heard my mother say that the Prince of Darkness offered him the treasures of the earth," said Myrrha.

The eyes of Brabano glowed again. They rested upon the beautiful countenance of the maid, with a gaze so intense that she lowered her head in confusion.

"Let it be as she has it," he said, softly. "He was a god."

"How happens it," cried Lucius, "that I learn of this so late? For weeks my men have labored in the Jewish quarters, and daily have I their reports. Now, in my very household, I am informed of matters which I have sought in vain elsewhere."

"Thou shouldst amend thy spies, good father," laughed Valentina.

"I learned of this in my childhood," said Myrrha. "My father was a follower of Christus."

"Christ, my child," said Brabano, gently; "'tis a Jewish name, well known; only the unfamiliar Latin hath distorted it. What said thy father?"

"I have little memory," she replied. "My father, Lucius, can tell thee how poor was my opportunity to know him."

"'Tis true," said Lucius, with a sigh. "Long ago, it seems, and yet the child is young, I was with the legions in Cilicia; there was a revolt against our army. Her father, a Sicilian, was innocently slain and his home destroyed in the tumult. Her mother, with Myrrha and a brother, two children, scarcely more than babes, fled to my pavilion for safety—a handsome woman, as thou mayst recall, who was lady to Drusa, and later to Agrippina. I brought her to Rome, and on the way we lost her boy. Resentful of his father's death, which he ascribed to my men, he escaped in the night and wandered off in the forests of the mountains. The grief nearly broke his mother's heart. She survived, in sadness, but a few years, and at her death, Myrrha became our child."

He looked at her with a fondness that left no doubt of her place in all their affections.

"But a Christian, sayest thou?" asked Brabano.

"The child is not at fault," said Lucius.

"Nay, and were she, it would not be my lips that would chide her," said the physician, gently.

"She was a follower of the Christus, as was my father," said Myrrha. "It grieves me, therefore, that those among the Jews that think as she did must find their fate so hard."

"They are under the displeasure of the Emperor," said Lucius.

"Truly," observed Brabano. "And Paulo, when he said there were no Roman gods, forgot our home divinity."

"Sects change," continued Lucius, "and these Jews have learned to practise sorcery. The leader may have been more worthy, else thy mother, child, would not have followed him; but I question if the religion be the same."

"The sect is the same," said Brabano, "although they may practise different rites. Even the worship of Isis hath varied, in my memory, and the priests of Kypris and Asklepios change their forms of devotion as they change their robes. I could buy their temples for wine-shops if I pleased. Dost say, Volgus, that there are meetings of these people in the city?"

"In secret," replied the freedman. "I have tried, vainly, to learn of them. Before my lord Fabyan journeyed east I had heard of it, but the significance came not to me, until I heard his speech with the Jew, Paul. A notable man, my master, as Lord Fabyan will say—ay, and the Lady Berenice, who was much impressed."

"My soldiers say they meet in secret, if indeed the sect be the same," said Lucius, "which now I doubt. Fabyan mentioned naught of this to me."

"He had scarce time, my father," said Valentina. "His greeting was for a moment only; hence his promise to come to-night."

"Truly; but this Paul who comes with him is a priest of the sect," said Lucius, slowly. "Doubtless we can learn of these Christians most fully. It may be a fortunate chance, if it be true, and yet bring no harm to him. Fabyan can secure him immunity, and we may apprehend such of his fellows as are unworthy, and practise sorcery."

"Not he, good master," laughed Volgus. "He has

had years in prison for a loyalty to his faith, and seeks only to die after the manner of his Lord. They speak of these matters at the training-quarters, where some of the Jews have promised the gladiators a life beyond the grave if they die in the new creed. Those of the men who go to the Jewish section would be eaten by beasts before they would speak to betray their friends. The Jewish women seal their lips."

"Since Fabyan tarries, we may let the matter rest until his coming," said Paulo. He was wearied of the conversation and spoke to change it. "I have been at the training-quarters myself to-day—the school near the temple of Vesta; they have missed old Volgus there."

The freedman acknowledged this speech by a grunt of satisfaction.

"It is well to be abroad, Lord Paulo," he said. "In my following of my master Fabyan, I have missed nothing of the amphitheatre, still less the training-quarters, where I go from habit only. What with perils at sea, shipwreck, and those disasters which accompanied our return journey, of which thou hast heard, I have seen more dangers than have looked at me over a little shield."

"Truly; but, Volgus, they have a new Gaul at the quarters who is late from Athens. He hath served his turn in the amphitheatre there and also at Pompeii. He was matched to-day against thy favorite pupil, and beat him soundly."

"Beat Marturen!" cried the ex-gladiator. "I must see to this myself."

"Thou hadst better," laughed the young man. "They said that he would beat thee also."

"Who said it?"

"Gainor, Virgil, Placidus—all said it."

"With the cestus?" asked the freedman. "And what saidst thou?"

The young man surveyed him teasingly.

"I have seen thee beat many a man, old Volgus. But seeing the Gaul, I said nothing."

"He but plagues thee, good Volgus," cried Valentina.

"Doth he?" said the ex-gladiator, scornfully. "I'll see this Gaul. By Hercules! I warrant the good master Fabyan would have found a fitting answer when I was not present to answer for myself."

"Fabyan hath yet to see the Gaul," observed the young man.

"I shall meet him on the morrow at the school," said Volgus. "And my sweet mistresses shall be present to see me shame thee, and win a wager from thee, too. May they not, noble master?" he continued, appealing to Lucius.

"He is flouting thee, old Volgus," said Lucius. "Didst not my daughter say so? But thou canst meet the Gaul and welcome. I warrant me thou wilt slay him if he stands long enough before thee."

"There is an answer, noble Paulo!" cried Volgus, triumphantly.

"May we not go, father?" asked Valentina, eagerly.

"Nay," said Myrrha, shrinking back. "I like not these cruel sports, and Volgus hath earned his peace. He hath promised me to fight no more."

"In the arena, sweet mistress. Wouldst thou have me rust for lack of exercise?"

"Why, 'tis exercise indeed, for Volgus, gentle one—a pastime merely," said Lucius. "Thou shalt go and see him punish this upstart. Thou wouldst not have thine old protector shamed?"

"Ho, ho!" cried Volgus. "I warrant not!"

"Wilt wager?" asked Paulo.

"My necklace," cried Valentina, "against three hundred sesterces on Volgus."

"And I will wager also," cried Myrrha. "Since we are to go, I shall win something too."

"Look to thy money, good master!" cried Volgus.

"I have only need of a necklace to give to one I love," said Paulo, taking out his tablets. "I will wager with the lovely Myrrha also. Poor Volgus!"

The ex-gladiator laughed scornfully as he stepped back to his position at the column, and Paulo looked at Valentina with a smile.

"Some one comes," observed Lucius, as two figures appeared in the night, advancing along the walk from the steps.

"'Tis Fabyan!" said Myrrha, half arising; and then she resumed her seat, her color under the lights making her yet more beautiful.

V

THE APOSTLE

FABYAN made known his guest to the assembled company, and seated himself near the young girls. He was soon conscious of the joy which his presence afforded Myrrha, who looked at him with eyes that sparkled with delight; but his interest for a time was centred upon the Jew, whom he now knew as the apostle of a new faith. And Fabyan had come to view this faith with awe, if not with reverence. His kindred had learned, in part, of the principal events of the journey from Cæsarea, but he had not revealed to them the singular character of the personage to whom they were now introduced. He was content to let them discover for themselves the import of Paul's mission and of the creed which he professed. The young man could not conjecture what the effect would be upon his uncle and his household; he suspected that Myrrha knew something of the strange religion, having learned it in her childhood. He had come to this conclusion from things which she had said to him from time to time, and which only now appealed to him with significance. Nor did the bearing of his companion disappoint him. The Apostle had seen too much of the world and its company, and knew too well life's commonplaces, to be unduly impressed by any gathering into which he might be thrown. Human power and human authority were no longer potent to awe one who knew life as he knew it, and who had sounded in so many hearts its depths

and shallows. He answered, gently, the questions put to him. His passive face and the gravity of his manner won upon them until they felt the spell of his presence. Brabano was impressed. His keen eyes studied each detail of the Apostle's person, and his knowledge went also to the latent strength beneath the calm exterior. He did not mistake the metal that would ring true beneath the stroke of the hammer.

Fabyan took no part in the conversation; he preferred to be silent, watching Myrrha, bathing his senses in the beauty of her presence, and noting anew, as he had done a thousand times, the loveliness of her profile and the tender charm of her face.

The Apostle had not failed to observe the elegance of his surroundings and the exceeding luxury of the villa, a luxury that put to shame even the splendors of the kingly palace at Cæsarea, or the dwellings of the rich in Byzantium and Athens. The lights from the hanging lamps within disclosed to him the treasures of art that had been contributed by a score of conquered countries within Roman domination, but his awakened philosophy found no envy, but only a moral in such grandeur; he knew the value of wealth that decays. He had come to the household of the kinsman of his friend with his heart set upon the high purpose of his life. He was to save him, and those to whom he was attached—to save him and them to the service of that God whom he worshipped. He was a man of austere nature, but his whole being was softened by love. Every moment was dedicated to the service of Christ and Him crucified. The opposition he had met since he had taken up his mission, the hatred engendered by his teachings in the minds of the unbelieving, and that profound enmity which arose against him, principally among his own people, whom his words rebuked, had strengthened his rugged nature, but it had not hardened his

heart. His faith had melted down his whole being, and, though his language was fearless and direct, his words were chosen to soothe and not to wound. He saw the interest he had awakened in Brabano, and he did not mistake it; but it gave force to the resolution of his mind.

Fabyan knew the court physician well, his power and his reputed wealth. Brabano expressed for the young soldier a warm friendship, but even when Fabyan frequented the throng about the person of Nero their association had been slight. The difference in their ages in part accounted for this; but Brabano professed youth of spirits, and sought, rather than shunned, youth and its pleasures. He attended the exhibitions at the amphitheatre with the regularity of one who enjoyed its horrors, at which Fabyan marvelled. A pleasure in such brutal sports was not unusual in one of the court physician's rank; it was, in truth, the rule, for the arena drew its inspiration from the court; its order was laid by the direction of the Emperor himself. The senate claimed that the populace exacted it, but its claim was an apology for the license of the times. Fabyan knew that there were those in Rome who at intervals revolted at its cruelties; that, inured as were the whole people to blood and war, that domestic spirit which made the city a great municipal abiding place was at times affronted. The instincts of maternal love, and those affections of the family that were growing out of the brief intervals of peace and association, were making themselves felt in the great popular heart. Although Fabyan knew this but slightly, Paul guessed it well, and it was from these seeds sown in the human breast that he was to make his creed, the harvest of which should bloom throughout the earth. But these sentiments were beginning only, and their growth was slow; the Roman populace, as a whole, was brutalized. Nero

knew it, and his counsellors profited by it. Burrhas declared that the amphitheatre made soldiers, and Seneca, smoothing his philosophy to the conscience of his master, averred that the invincibility of Rome grew from the fact that no touch of pity stayed the stroke of her sword. "The true soldier," he said, "is a destroyer, purely; when he hath slain his enemy there is none to dispute his title to the spoils."

Upon the surface, the life of the court physician was clean. He was a man lavish of gifts, for a bribe was one of the methods of power, but on his high brow there was no hypocrisy. Lucius esteemed him, and was rewarded by a faithful friendship. There were others of his diplomacy, like Lucius, in the senate. Though built in the fashion of the times, they abhorred crime and cruelty; they respected war for what it brought, and were proud of the Roman dominion; they loved place and esteemed their own positions, but they were neither base nor sensual; although they attended the court banquets, they detested the tyrant who ruled them, and were held in check only by a knowledge of their helplessness and that loyalty which high natures give to the government of which they are a part.

Listening, half dreamily, to the conversation about him, Fabyan came to think of how the influence of the powerful physician might aid the fortunes of the Apostle, as yet undetermined in Rome. He knew the enmity which the teachings of Paul would excite, and understood how little they were to be modified by any fear of consequences. But Rome was Rome, with Nero for an Emperor, and the games of Neptune not far in the future. None were exalted above the Imperial wrath, and the Apostle was fearless. The doctrine of "love thine enemies" was not one to placate a tyrant, and to forgive one's enemies was a heresy to reflect upon the Imperial court. Fabyan was conscious of the fact that

his new friend walked upon the brink of an abyss, and that this danger threatened himself. It was not yet apparent, but it would develop under the keen observation of Brabano, and become real when Paul had made himself better known in Rome; and, what was more, the young soldier knew that it reflected also upon his friends and kindred. But he was powerless to resist those direct promptings of his nature which bade him be true to his new impressions.

"Hast worshipped yet at the temple of Isis, to give thanks for thy safe arrival in Rome?" asked Brabano, presently.

"Nay," replied the Apostle, quietly, as Lucius, who understood the purport of the question, bent his head to listen.

"'Tis a place of beauty," continued Brabano. "The sculpture and frescos are of Athens, and the marbles of the floor once adorned the Temple at Jerusalem. They are very ancient, but in no wise marred. The priests are liberal and the goddess most gracious."

"There is no goddess Isis," said Paul, with deliberation. "There is a graven image, the work of human hands, which is as deaf either to praise or entreaty as any other piece of stone. I should as readily bow down to one of these marble columns."

"Scarcely," responded the physician, smiling. "The stone of Isis represents something within ourselves, the nature of which we know not; and 'tis an old worship."

"Hast thou found good to flow from it, with all its age?" asked Paul.

"The priests say so," and Brabano smiled.

"Do they tell thee that the goddess will save thy soul when thou art dead?"

Brabano laughed. "When I am dead there should be little left to save; there are certain goods that the

Emperor may take, and a certain memory that will be soon forgot."

"I have a better prospect," said the Apostle. "'Tis not the hopeless one thou speakest. Thou hast a better prospect if thou knew it."

"I would know it," replied Brabano, gravely. "If thou canst, tell it."

"I shall never die," said Paul; "nor any who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ."

Lucius contracted his brows, while Brabano looked steadily at the man before him.

"What Christ?" he asked. "The man slain in Jerusalem during the time of Pilate?"

"The same; that Christ who was the son of the living God."

"I said a demi-god," laughed Valentina, breaking in. Then she lowered her head under the reproving glance of her father.

The Apostle turned his eyes upon her, filled with a light so holy that she lifted her face as though by inspiration.

"That Christ," said Paul, "who died to save mankind."

"How save them? Thou shalt not die, dost thou say?" asked Lucius, his brow puzzled.

Brabano nodded his head approvingly, as though the question was his own.

"Not die, in the sense that I am lost," replied the Apostle. "My breath may leave this mortal frame; but the spirit that lives within this frail temple of the body, that speaks and hopes and loves, will live forever. Why should we die? What is the purpose of death? Is there no place where shall be made good to us those evils which we suffer here? Whence comes the love which Lucius feels for those near him now; and when he cannot protect them himself will not his heart appeal

to some one or something that will answer its cry? If in this life only we have hope, is it worth the living? All the bitterness of death comes from such a thought."

"'Tis most natural then," said Brabano.

"'Tis most unnatural," continued Paul, vigorously, "unless thou canst find the answer. I have found it. Mine is more than the doctrine of hope; 'tis the doctrine of certainty."

They were listening eagerly now. Fulvia rested her arms upon the table as she looked into his face, while the luminous orbs of Myrrha glowed with unwonted brilliancy.

"'Tis a folly that hath seen only a passing beauty in nature," continued the Apostle; "that hath found no serious purpose in the heavens above and the solid earth beneath. Why should we fear when hope is better? Why hate when love is better? Why should man have death, which all men fear?"

"Death is with us, notwithstanding," said Lucius. "I have seen it since my childhood."

"But thou hast not loved it," said Paul, kindly. "Nor wilt thou weep the less when it cometh to thy household; unless thou learnest that it is but the sleep from which the loved one wakens to a better morning, under the smile of Christ, who is the Lord."

"And thou wilt so awaken?" asked Brabano.

"Ay—and all who love the Lord, and believe His word."

"And live again?"

"Forever," said the Apostle, solemnly.

"Tell us," said Myrrha, and she spoke without rebuke.

Lucius thought no longer of his designs against the Christian. His interest was excited by the consideration which Brabano gave to the stranger; but he was most impressed by the words, which appealed to him as no words had ever appealed to him before.

Slowly the Apostle began his story, telling first of the shepherds who watched in the fields and saw the birth of the new star; of the Babe born in the manger at Bethlehem, and the meaning of His birth; His life, His teaching, His suffering, and His death; His resurrection and its promise. Even Volgus drew nearer as the recital proceeded, hearing again the familiar language that had moved his master on their journey. The lights had departed from the streets below when the story was finished.

VI

A STRANGER IN ROME

THE morning was well advanced when a party of five persons, evidently of distinction, with numerous attendants, passed the market-place south of the Subura, and took a course along the Sacra Via towards the amphitheatre. The active barter had ceased about the market, but there yet remained a crowd sufficient to be interested in this group and to observe its members curiously as they passed. The hour was unusual. Patricians were common enough in the streets of Rome, and even in this vicinity; they moved freely among the mixed populace that made up the numbers of the great metropolis, but commonly they went in vehicles or litters, and were accompanied by an armed retinue. In this respect the group in question was sumptuously served, for two soldiers of the guard marched ahead, with stately step, solemn in helmet and breastplate, and a corps of servants made up the rear, bearing spears and short-swords. But the patricians were on foot, and two of them were women, young and sufficiently beautiful to call forth exclamations of admiration and pleasure from the surrounding throng. They were well known, also, for the people had often noted them in the pageants of the court and occupying the seats of distinction at the public games; and the haughty person of Lucius was a familiar figure at the head of the Roman guards. But the curiously inclined wondered at their presence at this early hour in the neighborhood of the training-

quarters of the gladiators, and, though they kept at a respectful distance, they followed the procession to the very doors of the great building. They recognized, also, the muscular figure of Volgus, and the person of a gladiator was always sufficient to excite a popular interest, particularly in the quarters occupied by the plebeians. The ex-gladiator stalked in front, near the soldiers, and immediately behind him, walking between his daughter and her adopted sister, was Lucius, accompanied by Paulo.

They had reached their destination, for the soldiers, following directions evidently given them in advance, stopped before a sullen-looking structure and waited for the others to approach. It was a massive building of stone, its entrance a dark archway cut in the wall, its wide proportions flanked right and left by two enormous circular towers. Its height was great, but the windows of the structure were small and mean, looking mostly from the second story. A wide space was cleared in front, hard-paved and bare, and a line of short pillars, carrying a warning against the too near approach of the idle and the curious, circled about this space. That the crowd had ventured to disregard the significance of this obvious barrier was proof of the character of the visiting party and the popular reliance upon the indulgence of the great. The main building behind its towers was bisected by covered corridors, also of stone, leading to small buildings on the right and rear. These were evidently dwellings, for in the open windows, here of more generous proportions, were the garments of men, drying in the sun, while within could be seen arms, shields, and spears affixed to the walls. A careless disorder betokened the absence of all feminine care, and the place had the loose appearance of the barracks of soldiers. In the larger building, which they entered, a better order was apparent. Its centre was a wide space,

swept scrupulously clean, while rows of seats arising in tiers enabled a spectator to overlook the exercises within any portion of the hall. Huge iron bars rested against the pillars of the place, and here again were seen racks of weapons, burnished to soldierly brightness. Great balls and great stones for lifting were at the side, and great implements for testing the strength were scattered along a wide aisle, its inner partition a row of oaken pillars, extending the length of the building.

A cluster of men standing about came instantly to attention, viewing the visitors with friendly interest. They were of imposing stature and massive frame, and the knotted muscle of bared arm and shoulder told of a trained sinew and a strength invincible. Here were the men who fought in the arena for the pleasure of the Roman public; the men who laughed at fate and made death a pastime.

Although they had been often to the games, this was the first visit of Valentina and Myrrha to the training-quarters of the gladiators, and they looked about them with an intense curiosity. It was a place where the favored patrician might go with freedom, but the Roman lady of rank was an unusual visitor. Yet neither Valentina nor Myrrha was embarrassed or abashed. The patrician woman was confident of her demeanor, and they were now in the presence of men whose only dignity lay in their physical prowess.

A gladiator came forward; he had the ease and bearing of a man accustomed to the patrician order.

"Welcome, most noble general!" he exclaimed, as he bowed low to the ladies. "And thou, old Volgus, it is good to see thee again at home. What brings thee?"

"A wager, Cainor," said Paulo. "I spoke last evening of Calcus, and Volgus agreed to beat him at the cestus. These noble ladies back him."

"The gods smile upon them!" said the training-

master. "It is a gentle heart that stands to a friend, and faith half brings victory. How now, old comrade?"

"This Gaul," said the freedman, bluntly. "I am old in skill, but young enough, since, like thee, I won my freedom in the amphitheatre. The cestus is a poor weapon for a gladiator, but I'll not have young Paulo scoff at my record of a hundred battles. Cestus, or blade and buckler—it matters not to me."

"Enough, old hero!" laughed the master. "Ho, there, Virgil! Summon Calcus."

The gladiators gathered quickly and grouped about the open space in the centre, their eyes a-light at the words of their chief. They gave Volgus cordial and approving smiles. The Gaul shortly joined them, coming speedily through a door from a low corridor to the rear.

He was tall and lithe, the perfection of muscular strength and vigor. His swarthy body glistened in the light, and the muscles rolled under the shining skin as though they were greased. As he strode forward he suggested the suppleness of the tiger, his eyes gleaming fiercely from under his dark brows.

"The cestus, lad," said Cainor. "An old friend of the school and the arena seeks a bout with thee. He is now a freedman, serving the noble Lucius. The noble Paulo told these fair ladies of thy skill, and old Volgus promised to meet thee. Wilt beat him?"

The Gaul smiled. His eyes left the graceful figures of the girls and surveyed, from head to foot, the massive form of his would-be antagonist.

"Ay," he replied, presently. "I think it."

"Well said!" cried the master, as Volgus leaped at his words and sprang eagerly to the centre. "Prepare thee, lad. 'Tis a noble hour, I promise thee. Here, my children, make them ready."

"Bravo, old Volgus!" cried Virgil. "Here is Placidus," and he indicated a noted giant at his side, cele-

brated as a master of the sword in the amphitheatre, "who said we should see thee again in harness, and that not a week gone by. But better the blade and any man present than this barbarian who will face thee now. 'Tis no dishonor if thou lose."

"Well said, Virgil," cried the master. "A friendly word does thee credit."

"I thank thee also," said Myrrha, smiling upon the brawny athlete, whose bronzed face showed his pleasure. "My wager is on my old friend."

"Ho, ho!" grunted Volgus, who had thrown aside his scarf and was knotting the thongs of the cestus about his wrists.

"Dost thou *think it*, Gaul, as thou hast said? Stand straight!"

"Hold!" cried Lucius, lifting his arm and turning haughtily about. "Here, Cainor; who are these strangers?"

He indicated two persons who stood by, apart from the group of gladiators, and looking curiously upon the scene.

One was a Jew, an old man with white hair and beard, dressed humbly, but carrying about his person a certain air of dignity and distinction. His garments, though not rich, and of sober hue, were cleanly and of good quality, and he leaned upon a staff that was tipped with gold. His companion was a young man of strange attire and unusual appearance, even for cosmopolitan Rome. He was about twenty-six years of age, his skin brown from exposure to the sun, but his hair was light and his eyes a deep blue. He was nobly proportioned, standing erect and bearing himself with the same haughtiness and assurance that marked the manner of Lucius. His tunic was of green silk and his buskins of leopard skin, the thongs, lined with white kid, showing the dark spots of the fur as they were fastened above the knee. A

scarlet mantle swung from his shoulder, thrown back and clasped by a knot of gold. His girdle was of silver, and from it hung a long and shining blade, unlike the short weapon common to the Roman.

He squared his shoulders proudly under the look of the patrician general, returning his glance with one of obvious directness, although its fire was tempered by an evident respect for his age and character.

His companion removed his turban and stepped humbly forward, bowing repeatedly.

"Away!" cried Cainor, quickly, interrupting his passage, and motioning him back. "Go, Zekiah, as the noble Lucius wishes. Thou mayst come again when he has gone."

"Nay," said the Jew, stepping aside and still bowing —"when I have paid my duties to the noble Lucius and his beautiful companions. All of us know his noble heart, and the gracious Fulvia is my patron. Her meats are bought from my shops, and I have interests with her noble brother, Regnus. The door of the quarters was open, and I entered with my young friend to do homage to my noble general."

"'Tis as he says, noble cousin," spoke Paulo. "He hath much freedom here, for he lends money to the gladiators. He is reputed the wealthiest Jew in the Subura."

"A fortunate robber," laughed Lucius, good-naturedly. "I thank thee, good Jew, and will learn of thee further from my household. But thy young companion hath a forward air; I like it not."

"'Tis a handsome air," muttered Valentina, softly. "I have seen no man to compare with him in beauty in all my life."

"Hush!" said Myrrha, casting upon the stranger a look of admiration that her ingenuousness could not conceal.

"He is a prince, noble general—a Briton," said Zekiah, "who hath been commended to my household

during his stay in Rome. 'Tis a strange name, Ethelred, but an honest and noble heart he carries."

"A beautiful name," murmured Myrrha, as the young man came forward.

"I greet thee, good young sir," said Lucius, kindly. "I have liked the Britons since my youth. Rome never conquered a nobler people. Since I know thee, thy presence is a pleasure. Go on, good Cainor."

Volgus and the Gaul had faced each other and stood waiting, impatiently, the termination of this dialogue. They became now the figures of common interest, Calcus swinging himself into position, his arms poised before him. He circled swiftly about his foe, his step catlike and his countenance glowing with the ardor that inspired him.

Volgus followed his movements keenly, his features growing wrathful as the lithe body kept away, slinking, with crouching shoulders, about him. It kept just beyond the reach of the huge arms, and looked with green eyes upon the front which Volgus presented, as he turned slowly and deliberately to follow the stealthy movements.

"Watch him, old Colossus," cautioned the master, alarmed at the anger visible in the face of his ancient friend. "Thou dost not know him."

"Ay, but I know myself," replied Volgus, "and but I reach him once it is over."

The gladiators watched them with eyes aflame. Slowly the Gaul crept about his massive foe, stooping and rising, feinting and drawing away. A smile was upon his curled and cunning lips. There was not a sound, as they looked upon each other, but the muscles were swollen about the great shoulders of Volgus until his arms were like bars of oak.

It was the Gaul who assaulted. He leaped in upon his adversary like a flash, darting between his braced fore-

arms as though thrown from a catapult, and then falling back and away, with an agility that escaped all hurt. There were two reports, like the sharp breaking of a heavy board, and, as the Gaul crept stealthily once more about his foe, the blood spurted from a gash in the giant's cheek, and a splotch of crimson showed in the hair on his broad chest.

The gladiators shouted with glee, their cries ringing among the rafters overhead. Then they were silent again, every faculty centred in their eyes.

The Gaul went in again. He went with the same cat-like ferocity and speed. But the ponderous arm of Volgus caught him at the neck, coming true from the shoulder, and he went down to the sand, doubled like a ball, only to spring, as though by a rebound, to his feet. The mailed hand had slipped along his shoulder as though his body was oiled, and, although a cut showed red in the back, the cunning face still wore its smile, and the confident light yet gleamed in the eyes.

Once more he attacked, his movement as rapid as before. Volgus struck with potent force, but his blow met the idle air, and he reeled away from a shock that caught him fairly above the eyes. He defended with a skill that sent the Gaul once more to his stealthy motion around him, but now he followed his slippery foe with more caution, and eyed him with redoubled watchfulness.

"Is it not enough, good uncle?" asked Myrrha, uneasily.

"Why, my child," said Lucius, "they are scarcely warmed, and they have a pleasure in this that I have felt in battle a hundred times myself. Thou hast little need to pity them. Look to thy bet, for old Volgus hath his match."

Once more the Gaul assaulted, but Volgus dropped to his knee and struck upward. His foe rolled over twice, coming to his feet with but little show of damage, and

striking in reply almost instantly. Volgus knocked him off again, but his great blows seemed only to glance from the loose muscles of the barbarian, who lost neither breath nor strength under them.

"Old Volgus would kill another of his type," said the master. "But this Gaul is elastic, while he strikes with the force of a battering-ram. I see it now; Calcus will beat him."

The Gaul heard him, and his lip curled. He leaped forward, but his master's word of confidence was fatal. The old gladiator struck him in the head with all his shoulder behind the blow, and the swart body dropped like a log, only the muscles throbbing and quivering as he lay with outspread arms.

"Habet!" shouted Lucius. "Well done, old conqueror!"

Volgus laughed hoarsely as he surveyed his fallen foe.

"'Twas near an accident," he said, "and I confess it. But for my name, and to sustain my absent and noble Fabyan, I would not claim the fight. And, then, here is the pretty wager of my sweet mistress."

"Thou hast not killed him, Volgus?" asked Myrrha, in a hushed voice. She looked pityingly at the figure which the gladiators were bearing away, while Cainor stood by to congratulate the victor.

"Nay, noble heart," laughed the freedman. "Within an hour he will drink a wine sack with me, nor hold me in malice either. If Cainor will but teach him the blade he will slay many ere he crosses the Styx."

"Well, 'tis over," said Lucius, "and fairly, too. We are to visit the beasts at the arena, and shall move along."

"They have been fed, noble patron," replied the master. "I came from there but shortly."

"Thou mayst keep Volgus here," said Lucius, "to make friends with the Gaul when his senses come again;

but watch them at the wine. Come, Paulo, and my sweets; the hour grows late."

"Where is the Briton?" asked Myrrha of Valentina, in a whisper, looking about her.

Valentina laughed. "'Twas the question on my own lips as I turned to thee," she replied. "He was here when the Gaul fell, but almost immediately, as I looked again, he and his old companion had withdrawn."

Myrrha sighed.

"Nay," laughed Valentina. "He is easily found, since his friend is known to our household; and, from the glances he had for thee, I doubt if he will run away."

VII

THE LION

LUCIUS and his party left the training-school of the gladiators, and proceeded along a broad thoroughfare that led in the direction of the amphitheatre. At the corner of the Sacra Via they met slaves with litters. The day was pleasant, however, and Lucius bade them follow in the rear, preferring to continue the journey on foot. The street was paved with stones, but dusty with travel, and, beginning at a wharf on the Tiber, terminated at one of the large, arched entrances to the rear of the arena. Here abode the keepers of the place, and the soldiers who guarded the beasts kept in their cages and dens for the games. Low dwellings and small shops looked upon the thoroughfare, and the girls were again the objects of admiring eyes as they picked their way daintily along, attended with every care by the watchful Paulo.

Cainor had bowed them from the quarters, with many speeches to emphasize the honor he felt at their visit, and their cheeks were yet flushed from the exciting sport which they had witnessed.

"I am to show you some noble beasts," said Paulo, gleefully. "The cages are full. I saw them but yesterday, hundreds of them, although the two black panthers of which a sailor told me are yet on shipboard with a rhinoceros from Egypt. I hope the Emperor will pit them against the gladiators; it is not nearly so pleasant to see the beasts fight among themselves."

"It is horrible that they fight at all," said Myrrha, with a shudder. "I wonder that men delight in such cruel pleasures."

"'Tis like the trade of war," observed Lucius; "the pleasure comes when it grows familiar. We can be gentler, sweet, in consequence when we have to do with love."

"I cannot see that love has aught in common with either war or the amphitheatre," said the girl. "Perhaps it is because my youth knew so much of bloodshed."

"Why, hear her!" laughed Lucius. "The child is scarce nineteen, and yet she speaks of youth. Ah—but these gray hairs! I would they were dark once more, and my journey less near its end at the black river!"

"I would have thee younger, since thou wishest it, yet for our sakes but little different," said Myrrha. "Thou art truly a soldier, good father, no less so than my splendid cousin, Fabyan. But the wise Brabano says that age is the time of gentle thoughts, and it seems to me that the doctrines of the Nazarene, of whom the Jew, Paul, spoke to us would bring to one more comfort than the turbulent memories of war."

"The Jew spoke well," observed Lucius, thoughtfully. "I shall hear him again, although his words make duty lame. He hath set my thoughts adrift, and the gods know where I shall find them."

"Is he of those wretches who have thrice fired the city?" asked Paulo. "I wondered as he spoke. I can show thee where the flames threatened the buildings on the Esquiline. Had not the gods graciously breathed upon the winds thousands of good people must have perished."

Lucius made no reply, but walked in silence, thoughtfully and with bowed head. A quiet fell on the others also, and they passed under the shadow of the outer walls of the amphitheatre, entering a door of masonry which

opened into a wide yard. From this enclosure barred gates led to the ring of the arena, and stairways of wood mounted to the seats for the spectators above. Ranged back under these seats, raised in tiers, were the vast cages of the animals, barred with iron in front and set in the solid masonry of the foundation. Behind them stone passages gave access from the rear, and these led by subterranean ways to the dens of the beasts in the centre of the ring. High pillars of stone supported the massive structure, and above the wide space of platform, aisle, and seat reserved for the Roman populace could be seen the bronze column of the eagle, lifting its shadow over the stately podium.

A soldier, guarding the portals, stopped them for a moment, standing respectfully in salute at sight of the Roman general. An officer, answering the summons of the sentinel, came forward to greet them.

"Ah, good Clytes," said Lucius, in recognition, "we have come to view thy charges. A rare collection, as Paulo tells us."

"An honor which I shall not soon forget," said the officer. "I have been here for many years—indeed, since I followed thee in Brittany—and never have I seen such beasts. The people have little knowledge of what the noble Emperor is preparing. The galleys which came yesterday brought many more, some finer than Rome hath ever known. We have a lion which is the father of his tribe, and, of some hundreds in my charge, he stands alone, like a great monarch. Wilt see him first?"

His closing words were lost in a mighty roar, which seemed to come from beneath their feet. It began with a low murmur, suggestive of distant thunder, and increased in strength until the great walls trembled. A chorus in frightful volume mingled with it, as the assembled menagerie, in varying notes of terror or defiance, answered the great blast. As it died away the

shrill scream of the tiger and the hoarse trumpeting of the elephants joined the falling notes, and the girls shrank back, shutting their ears against the hideous clamor and clinging closely to their protectors.

"By Mars!" cried Lucius, when his voice could be heard, "'tis like the tumult of battle."

"A familiar music here," laughed the officer, "and it lulls the neighborhood to slumber, rather than disturbs it. The Emperor and the noble Tigellinus viewed my charges yesterday, and gave special orders as to the animals and the Christians. Thy soldiers bring in many of the latter."

"I have not their report as to numbers," said Lucius, gloomily, "but doubtless I am faithfully served."

"All the criminals would be insufficient to satisfy this appetite," said the officer, turning and passing his hand through the air, indicating the long length of cage fronts. "A score of oxen scarce sufficeth for the day." Lucius, by a nod of his head motioned him forward, and he led the way across the intervening space between the entrance and the cages. Through the huge gratings were seen the muscular and tawny bodies, moving restlessly, and a sharp and offensive odor assailed their nostrils.

"See," said Clytes, pausing before a barred gate and indicating with his staff, "here is the monarch of the desert."

The great beast crouched low as they approached. Paulo had been pointing out to Valentina the lithe forms of the black panthers near at hand, and now they came to where the others were looking at the monster whose shaggy mane was a small mountain behind the thick rods, his yellow eyes gleaming savagely at the visitors.

Myrrha stood as if fascinated, her dark orbs distended with the terror which possessed her soul. A spell seemed to enthrall her. The beast took the form of a spectre,

that seemed to conjure up a future in which she was involved; she shuddered, as before her fixed eyes dark shadows took outline. She saw the dim figure of the Apostle Paul, and about him were kneeling hooded women; the cry of children came to her ears, and then a low and murmured sobbing. She lifted her hand to shut out the sight, and the officer spoke again.

"Caligula," he said, with a touch of pride, "the noble Emperor named him, and Tigellinus approved. They laughed together yesterday when here. The beast is not to be slain, and I am ordered to preserve him carefully."

"I have not seen his like," said Lucius, admiringly. He had not observed the emotion of Myrrha, and drew nearer to the bars for a better view.

His action, and the sweep of his colored toga, angered the huge captive; he retired, snarling, back into his den. For a time he crouched there in sullen rage, his yellow eyes regarding the visitors with a fierce, dangerous light. Their continued presence seemed to infuriate him. He sprang up and paced the floor of his cage. The officer thrust his staff through the bars. The action stirred the beast to a new rage; crouching again in the rear of his den, he leaped forward with a mighty bound, bringing his great body with terrific force against the grating. The rods bent under the impact of the blow, like willow wands.

"By the gods! Quick, man!" shouted Lucius, in alarm, placing himself before the girls. "Call the keepers!"

The officer stood, looking in amazement upon the scene, bereft for a moment of speech. He seemed too stunned for action, staring helplessly as the paws of the lion pulled the bars asunder, his mountainous shoulders forcing a passage through the aperture. Paulo seized Valentina by the hand and drew her rapidly away. She followed him instinctively, seeking a place of safety.

Their attendants waited without, but, at a little distance from where they had viewed the great lion, a gateway between the cages led to an enclosure connected with the passages to the rear, and here were several keepers and soldiers. In this direction Paulo bent his steps, dragging Valentina after him, in the tumult of the moment thinking only of her safety, and bent upon saving her. Neither he nor Valentina gave heed to Myrrha, who, yet under the influence of the terror that had at first possessed her, stood transfixed.

With the presence of mind of a soldier Lucius sprang to the side of the officer, and drew his sword from its sheath. Noting that the man was overcome by the sudden crisis which confronted them, he leaped to where the struggling lion was forcing himself to freedom, and with the point of his blade endeavored to force him back into the cage. But the thick mane was a shield against its edge, and, turning his great body against the warped rods of the grating, the lion sprang through. From the height above the ground he rolled upon the sand, but quickly gained his feet. He stood, his head aloft, lashing his tail with long sweeps, motionless otherwise, as though surprised at his sudden liberty.

With all the valor of the years behind him the old soldier went to the attack. He thrust his sword at the tawny throat, stooping that its point might take effect; but his reach was short, and a blow from the giant paw swept him to the ground.

The officer had now recovered himself, and ran, shouting, towards the quarters of his men, while Myrrha stood alone, white and silent as a statue, immediately confronting the savage beast. Lucius was unhurt, save by the shock, but his muscles were dead to motion. He lay, looking with agonized eyes at the imperilled girl, his tongue refusing to utter the cry of warning that hung upon his lips.

Myrrha's dazzled senses returned to her. She thought of Fabyan, and a throbbing arose in her throat; a sense of suffocation stifled her. Then she folded her hands upon her breast and sank upon her knees. She did not doubt the fate in store for her, and, with the courage of the helpless and weak who in moments of supreme danger find a resolution from some divine source, bowed her head to meet it. However terrible, it was but momentary; a single pang, and all would be over. Her frail and tender flesh would be but a wisp under those great talons, and then, perhaps, her freed spirit would find that heaven of which the Apostle had spoken, and she would enter into that life whose felicity he had declared to them would have no end.

The lion crouched low, his massive weight resting upon his short, thick legs. A saliva dripping from his jaws added to the terror of his appearance, and his eyes were fire behind their mantle of hair.

But ere his spring was made a group of men appeared at the gate through which they had entered. The sentinel came with them as they advanced, under stress of the emergency, conveyed by the cries of the officer. A figure, young and active, passed between the girl and her peril, and a scarlet robe was dashed in the face of the lion; the flash of a long blade dazzled the savage eyes, and the drooping form of the girl was encircled by a firm arm.

"Lean on me," whispered a voice in her ear, thrilling her with a strange memory. Even in such an hour her benumbed senses caught its intonations, as in a dream. She felt herself drawn erect, and the voice spoke again, giving no trace in its calmness of excitement or fear.

"I will hold thee away, and meet the lion upon the point of my sword. The soldiers will have us in an instant."

But the lion had met a strange and frightful antago-

nist, which diverted its attention from all thought of prey and any thought except of conquest. Its fangs were entangled in the folds of a flaming object, the color of the blood that it knew so well, an object which yielded a strange taste, and which clung to the claws with which it was rent. Tearing the red mantle with all his strength, the beast dashed across the space of the enclosure, emitting fierce growls, tossing the shreds into the air, and again biting them fiercely in the sand.

"Nobly done, young Jew!" shouted the voice of Fabyan, following the new-comers. "I envy thee thy speed of foot. Aid thou the girls to safety, good Paul, and I will stand by my uncle, and this gallant of the cloak."

The speaker sprang to the side of the fallen Lucius, and, helping him to his feet, drew him quickly in the direction of the opening at which Paulo and Valentina had sought safety.

The youth who had intervened between Myrrha and the lion followed quickly with his charge. Fabyan had at first sought to relieve him, but, perceiving that Myrrha was safe, and that his uncle was insecure of foothold, led the way to the point of refuge. While the lion was yet fighting the red token that had diverted him, they gained the retreat between the cages, and the gates swung between them and danger.

The keepers had gathered quickly at the call of the officer, and, having unloosed the bars and assisted the visitors to escape, now stood ready, with spears of iron and with ropes, to set about the capture of the freed animal.

"Fabyan!" cried Lucius, when he had recovered breath, leaning against the shoulder of his nephew and looking with grateful eyes in the direction of the rescued girls, "what good-fortune brought thee to us at such a time?"

"I called at the house with Paul this morning, and,

having found thee gone, followed to the amphitheatre. Cainor told us of thy coming here, and the slaves with the litters outside said that thou wert within. At the moment of my arrival I heard the cries of the keeper. I ran forward, guessing some mishap, and was almost immediately joined by this brave young Jew and his companion. By Jupiter! his was a noble deed and a courageous one! Come forward, sir, that we may thank thee."

The young man thus addressed stepped to the front, standing modestly before them. His eyes rested upon the face of the girl whom he had rescued, slowly recovering her composure in the grateful and delighted embraces of Valentina. His long sword was yet bare, and, bereft of his mantle, his form showed its graceful and noble proportions.

"I see no Jew present," he said, "except the man who came in thy company, called by thee Paul, and my good friend Zekiah. Thou canst observe him now," he continued, smiling, as he looked towards the old man. "He is so filled with fear that I doubt if he ever recover speech."

"'Tis true, indeed, noble Lucius!" exclaimed Zekiah, tottering forward upon his staff, his face the color of his beard. "My heart was in my throat at the thought of seeing this young maiden in the fangs of that wicked beast, and when I saw thy form upon the sand my heart bled for the noble Fulvia. Praised be Jehovah, that thou art saved!"

"Amen!"

The old man turned to where Paul stood with folded arms, his ears attracted by the voice that supplemented his exclamation of thanksgiving. Their eyes met with a familiar gleam, and then Zekiah touched his breast reverently with his finger-tips, drawing thereon the lines of a cross.

"'Tis a shame!" cried Paulo, stamping his foot with vexation. "I had no sword."

"Thou didst well enough," said Fabyan, kindly, regarding his lowered and envious features with a smile. "Valentina, at least, thou wouldst have saved, and the task to do more was beyond one man."

"But the general stood alone against the lion," said Clytes, stopping near them, as he directed his men through the gate.

"How otherwise, for an Amici?" returned Fabyan.

The officer bowed his head humbly as he passed out with his men to set about the task of the recapture of the lion.

"There was another, who stood alone against the lion," said Paul, regarding the young stranger intently.

"Truly," replied Fabyan, "Jew or German, sir," he continued to the young man, "I am thy friend, with my goods, my sword, and my life."

"I am a Briton," said the young man. "My name is Ethelred. I have already been made known to the noble Lucius."

"A prince, my lords!" cried Zekiah. "A great prince!"

"Prince or plebeian, it is the same to me now," said Lucius. "I am ever thy debtor, my brave friend."

"Thou wilt come with us to the house?" said Fabyan, cordially. "I have an abiding place that is thine, and my uncle's house is well known in Rome."

"I thank thee," said the Briton, bowing. "I have lodged with Zekiah, who hath sold many cattle for my father, and hath the keeping of his moneys here at Rome."

"Come with us," urged Fabyan. "These ladies will then have found voice to thank thee with their lips as I now see they thank thee with their eyes. It shall be my task, as well as that of my good uncle, to make thee

properly at home in Rome. We are known to the court and have some influence with the Emperor."

"In that event I shall come to thee," said the young man, smiling. "Thy Emperor, I observe, hath a manner of quick dealing with strangers that come to his notice with improper suddenness. The mention of his name puts Zekiah in a fright. For my own part, even though a prince, I am content to let him rule Rome as the people submit, so long as we may deal only with his legions in Brittany."

The eyes of Zekiah expressed an agony of warning. He writhed at the free speech of the young man, who answered him only with a smile.

"Thou knowest how to deal with the legions in Brittany; *that* I have proven," replied Lucius. "Thou wilt visit us, as thou hast been asked? Come, Fabyan, and thou, Paulo. Bring the girls. Home will be a welcome place to us now."

"They are to recapture the lion," said Paulo, looking through the bars at the men. "Shall we not wait?"

"Come!" cried Lucius, impatiently. "I am seeking to remember that the officer Clytes hath served with me in the years past. Now that my blood cools, I am offended at this peril. Let us go, before I find some one to blame."

"We have something to be grateful for, too," said Paul, standing with them. "God doeth all things well!"

He was looking at the young face of Ethelred.

"Come!" repeated Lucius, his anger growing. "Until I can shake the memory of this incident from my mind the amphitheatre will be a hateful place."

He led the way towards the gate to where the slaves awaited with the litters, and the rest followed. Clytes, who observed his departure, left his men and came forward to see him away. He was profuse in his apologies and congratulations, fearing that word of the affair

would reach the court. Lucius waved him aside, but he was reassured in the smile given him by both Valentina and Myrrha and comforted by the kindly demeanor of Fabyan.

When they were gone he rejoined his men, who had succeeded in returning Caligula to his cage.

VIII

TIGELLINUS

BRABANO kept no establishment. A household was the fashion in Rome among the rich and powerful, but Brabano had neither wife nor child, nor any known connection of either affection or blood. He had formerly maintained a house of most luxurious appointment, but since the beginning of the reign of Nero had been assigned quarters in the Imperial palace. Here he lodged in the most sumptuous state, the vast chambers devoted to his use being in a sequestered wing overlooking the Imperial gardens. He was one of the most powerful men in Rome, and yet unenvied—powerful because of his influence with the Emperor and Poppæa, and unenvied because he so little regarded it. He was a familiar figure at the banquet and triumphal march, but was quiet and unostentatious, neither loved nor hated by any of the scores of sycophants that clustered about the Imperial person. His birth was obscure, and his early fortune unknown. He professed to come from Alexandria, and, while admittedly a Jew, he held no communion with any Jewish people, nor took any part in either the affairs of the senate or the army. He had practised the profession of a physician from a house in the Forum Romanum during the reign of Claudius, and, having cured Salinus of a fever, was introduced to court. Here he had grown in influence until Seneca and Burrhas had come under his ministrations, and this fixed his status in the Imperial household. Nero had commanded

that he be always within call, giving thus the climax to his power. Wise, with discretion, proud without ambition, and combining a polite address with a certain dignity of carriage, he had won his way into a position from which none were interested in unseating him. When alone, he was meditative and thoughtful. His figure was seen walking in the gardens in the early mornings, lingering at the fountains, communing with the trees and shrubs and those countless rare creatures of plumage and color with which the Imperial park abounded. He was a man of safety and deliberation, and no hasty conspirator sought either his companionship or counsel.

He had not lingered at the house of Lucius upon the night of his meeting with Paul, nor made comment upon the story which he heard there. How much he had been impressed by the words of the Apostle his companions could not guess. He understood its effect upon them, but his own rare countenance exhibited nothing beyond interest; it was as much a mask to conceal his emotions as the bronze casts which decorated the frieze of his reception-chamber.

Leaving his friends, with his usual kindly words of farewell, and stating to Paul that they should meet again, he entered his litter and was borne by his slaves to the Palatine. Reclining upon the cushions, with curtains drawn against the night, he was silent until they stopped at the broad entrance of the palace. As he left the litter and ascended the marble steps, a commotion within the hall attracted his attention. Almost immediately a freedman came forward and accosted him.

"Thou art most fortunately come," he said. "For an hour we have sought thee everywhere."

Brabano paused, his brow clouded.

"The Empress had knowledge of my going, and could have reached me with a messenger. What is it?"

"The noble Tigellinus—he is dying, great Brabano."

"Hath the Emperor been informed?"

"The Emperor—sleeps."

The slaves did not see the smile which the countenance of the physician repressed.

"They dined together, noble Brabano—a great company—and the Lord Tigellinus left the table in perfect health. For an hour he hath called thy name."

There was little doubt of the fright of the freedman, and none of the regard in which the favorite of the Emperor was held. Tigellinus, cruel even beyond the conception of a devil—the second-thought and inspiration of the arch-Cæsar—was valued by those upon whom he showered favors.

The physician made a motion with his hand to signify that he was ready, and, following the hasty steps of the attendant, proceeded along the marble corridors. Near the centre of the palace, and overlooking the Imperial gardens, were the apartments of the prefect. Two of the German guard stood at the door, but they entered without ceremony. The lofty chamber was lighted by lamps of oil fixed against the walls, and upon his couch of gold lay the writhing figure of the favorite. Notwithstanding his plight, his person was imposing. His graceful form was richly clad and his attire sparkled with jewels. In the curls which were tossed above his damp brow there yet remained the leaves of the wreath he had worn at the feast, and against the dark hair there shone the glitter of a diamond.

"The gods bless thee!" he gasped, as the tall form paused at his side. "Canst save my life—it is not yet too late? 'Twas at the board, with the Emperor. The grapes were poisoned."

Upon a table near his couch were great, golden vessels of wine, with others of water, and jewelled flagons, and soft, silken cloths were strewn about. The slaves who

had sought to ease his pain stood near in helpless terror, and before a statue of Isis—one of a group of figures which formed a semicircle beyond the bed—two women were kneeling, with hooded heads.

"I should have bled my lord hadst thou not come," said a slave. "He hath suffered much."

Brabano's countenance changed slightly, but his look expressed nothing of significance. He acted with a promptitude that strengthened the confidence which his presence always excited.

Throwing aside his toga and standing in his tunic, he drew a phial from his girdle and poured its contents into a goblet of water. This he passed to the sufferer.

The sick man drained it at a draught and sank back with ghastly features. Holding him during the convulsion that followed, Brabano let him sink at rest finally upon the pillows, and smiled at the sigh of relief which attended his efforts.

"Clear away these basins and bring some lime-water," he said. "All danger is over."

"Thou art next to Cæsar, great friend," gasped Tigellinus. "I should have died but for thee. Was I poisoned?"

Brabano smiled. "Thou wert poisoned, truly, but not by design, nor in the sense that thou thinkest. Some flesh, perhaps, fed by chance upon foul herbs; some venom in the fruit, left by a noxious insect. It matters little since thou art safe."

The favorite recovered rapidly; a sturdy youth, spent in vigorous labor, had resisted the encroachments of his habits at the court. He shortly arose to his elbow.

"How is it with Cæsar?" he asked, anxiously. "He hath not suffered?"

"No, my lord," answered an attendant. "The adorable Emperor is sleeping."

"'Tis well," he said. "I shall have recovered on the morrow."

"Doubt it not," said Brabano, gravely. "The heart knoweth its own strength. Who was with thee?"

"Lucullus," laughed the favorite, now resting at ease upon his pillows, "the glutton Scaveas—a goodly lot—and two Nubian girls with skins like ebony. And the Emperor's poem was like the flow of wine. I would thou hadst heard it. Where wert thou?"

"At Lucius Amici's. I dined there."

"A sluggish evening, as I guess it. How goeth his harvest of those to feed the beasts? I forget the name —the followers of this—"

"Christus?"

"Ay?"

"He said not much. His nephew Fabyan hath returned from Judea, and I met him, following the feast."

"A better soldier than companion," said Tigellinus, indifferently. "I knew of his return — Berenice was with us. Old Lucius hath a goodly wife, although a trifle gone in years."

He laughed shortly, and continued, "I am little fond of these Amicis; Fabyan hath some parts, and then —there are the daughters; but some day Cæsar will attend to them."

"And the general—old Lucius?"

"He will go with the senate—when the senate goes to Pluto."

"'Tis not an unreasonable body," said the physician.

"No," replied Tigellinus, musingly; "not yet."

The favorite was wakeful, and Brabano, having resumed his toga, sat by to listen.

"There are some fifty of the Lucius company," continued Tigellinus, "that have ears for neither poetry nor song. We have had Tiberius, Caligula, and Claudius; our present Cæsar is the epitome of all. They dread

my power, and claim that I counsel waste; our lives weaken the empire, and we scatter the money of the legions. The games fill them with terror, and they look at the palace with green eyes. I hate a patriot who, loving himself more than his Emperor, is a hypocrite at heart. Our little waste is nothing, with the world to draw upon; and, spending it here in Rome, 'tis Romans get its benefits. There is no money spent in Gaul, Illyria, and Thrace. We shall have a reckoning some day."

He ground his teeth fiercely.

"The people love the games," said Brabano.

"They love us who make the games," said Tigellinus. "'Tis they and not the senate who make the empire."

"What is it of Lucius?"

"Not much," replied the favorite, slowly; "but enough. I am a freedman, as thou knowest, and am prefect because of myself alone. Thou wast here before me, and knew of Miriam?"

"The mother of Myrrha, who is daughter now to Lucius?"

"Ay. A woman so lovely, in all things good, that she lived at court for years in peace. Old Amici will not tell Fulvia how much he valued her—but that is gone. I would have had the girl here but for Poppæa."

"Myrrha?"

"Ay, Myrrha. But my Cæsar hath a fine eye, and it is not the policy of my love to vex him."

"Thou wert always wise," observed the physician.

"I talk freely to a man of wisdom," replied Tigellinus. "Perhaps thou mayst aid me sometime."

Brabano nodded.

"It was back in Agrigentum, in my youth," said the favorite, musingly. "I was born at Sicilia, on the southern coast. My father was a sailor, and these muscles had their early strength nourished on the sea.

Near us lived one Petria, who had married Miriam; Myrrha was their child. Although he kept a vineyard at that time, he had been a sailor with my father. He was married at Tarsus, and brought his wife to our town. There were two children. I remember the boy well—somewhat younger than I, and a favorite with my mother. The soldiers of Lucius slew him."

"Slew the boy?"

"Ay, at least that was the rumor. Old Lucius was a fine butcher in his youth, despite his taste for peace in these, his later years. I, also, as a child loved Myrrha. We were children all, and she the youngest—a companion to a sister of my own, whom I loved most fondly, Lucenella. Her people went to Tarsus, and there, in a local revolt, Petria was slain, as was his boy. This is as I have learned it. Lucius brought the mother, with Myrrha, to Rome, where they lived in a household of a sister of the Emperor until the Emperor's death. Then Lucius took the girl to his home. The fortunes of my own people suffered. My father was Roman born, but a foreigner in blood, and when he fell ill and went to debt the family was sold. Lucenella, my sister, died. I became a slave of Tulla Antonus, who lived in the Forum Boriam. Miriam loved me as a son, but her daughter was not for my companionship. Old Lucius would not that his foster-daughter should be familiar with a slave. 'What is she?' asked Tulla. 'Is not my son the equal of thy slave?' Old Lucius did not forgive him, and when he was later charged with the loss of public moneys prosecuted him before the senate. Tulla defeated him, and, finding favor with the Emperor, I grew in power at court. Thou knowest how I became a freedman and won the love of Nero. I saw the time last year when I could have rolled the head of Lucius at my feet. Ay, I could do it now."

"What held thy hand?" asked the physician.

Tigellínus laughed. "I know not, except a certain memory of Miriam, and perhaps the thought that he had been kind to Myrrha. I love the girl somewhat—on the better side of me."

The better side of Tigellinus was something to make Brabano marvel.

"Berenice was with thee to-night?"

"Ay. She hath brought a strange demeanor back with her. The Emperor noticed it, and made a sharp epigram about her brother; such a king is a good mark for wit. 'Tis something more than a quarrel with either Felix or Porcius Festus, although the last would kiss her feet. Though not so light as some ladies whom we know, she is not a vestal; but the man lives not for whom she would long grieve. Perhaps Fabyan Amici can tell us of it. I shall ask him."

"Fabyan Amici hath a long face also," said Brabano, for a purpose of his own.

"A magician travelled in their company," said Tigellinus. "We will have him at court if I think of it again. He shall do some tricks to amuse us or I shall make him a torch some day in the arena. We visited the cages at the amphitheatre yesterday. Ah, such beasts as we have assembled!"

"'Tis not a magician," said Brabano, slowly. "I saw the man and talked with him. 'Tis a poor Jew, who hath a weak mind, and, being condemned of Festus, appealed to Rome. He is a citizen by birth, and was once a soldier. I shall ask thy favor for him."

"Mine!" exclaimed Tigellinus, with a surprise that showed a suggestion of suspicion. "Thine own should suffice for such a case."

Brabano did not wince, although he saw his error.

"Truly," he replied, calmly, "except that he fancies himself a follower of Christus, and therefore stands condemned already. But he is of my race, and hath a

knowledge that can be useful to my craft. Being a captive and a citizen I may not make him a slave."

"He will last so long as he can serve thee," laughed Tigellinus. "As it stands thus thou shalt have my voice."

"I thought it," said the physician, rising. "Good-night."

"Good-night," answered Tigellinus. "I shall sleep, since by thy skill I am recovered. The gods bless thee!"

The physician bent his head gravely and left the chamber.

IX

BRABANO

THE Imperial garden lay on the slope of the Palatine, like some fabled grove of the Elysian Fields. The sunlight, playing on its foliage, made it a haunt of soft shadows, perfumed by a wilderness of roses. Here was every variety of shrub and fern, where the stately elm spread its green and protecting arms over the cypress and dwarf cedar, and the lilac, acacia, acanthus, and marigold mingled leaf and bud with the creeper and the vine. The white walks led through vale and dell—to thickets where at night the shadowy forms of the dryads seemed to linger, and in its moonlight spaces the nymphs of the air to bask in the golden beams—by cool grottos and near musical fountains, the rhythm of the waters in sweet chorus with the twitter of a thousand songsters. Here were timid deer and gentle hare, soft-eyed gazelles and diminutive apes; and the peacock, with flaming tail, and the paradise bird, with its plaintive note, watched by hundreds of keepers, gave evidence that the ruler of sumptuous Rome might see nature, upon awakening, in all its resplendent moods. The gates of this heaven were closed at the morning hour, and the populace excluded from every portion of the grounds, and now members of the trusted Germans stood at each entrance to keep the idle and the curious at a respectful distance. Nero was yet sleeping, but Poppæa was abroad, and, with several ladies of her train, had left the palace chambers for an hour in the rich air.

She was very beautiful, this favorite and wife of Cæsar, full-lipped and voluptuous, and the fulness of her lips expressed the sensuality of her mind, and her voluptuousness was in keeping with her sentiments and purpose. She was coy and cunning, shrewd beyond the knowledge of Tigellinus, and had a certain demure self-repression that put to slumber the astuteness of Seneca and the graver counsellors of Nero, and had defeated, even to death, the dominant mother of her lord and master. She knew as well how to protect her charms as how to care for her state, and a filmy veil shielded her complexion from the radiant morning, while near at hand lingered her litter bearers, who held aloft a canopy of feathers. Berenice was with her, and several gallants, who waited always at her call, mingled with jests and laughter among her attendants. Fabyan Amici had gone early to the palace. He desired a word with the Emperor, and bore also a message from Lucius. But finding Nero yet in slumber he hastened to the garden, whither he learned the Empress had gone. She made him welcome, and as he stood laughing with Berenice, Poppæa, with arms bared, struck with a willow wand in the waters of a fountain at the gold fish that darted through its crystal depths.

A burst of song came from a group of the ladies near at hand, accompanied by the music of a cithara, and then it ceased, as Poppæa threw away her wand and stood erect either to greet or rebuke an intruder.

It was Brabano who approached along a walk that led from his apartments through the park. He was splendidly attired in a robe which, he knew, would please the Empress. With stately carriage he came forward to greet her.

"The morning for thee, most beautiful of women!" he exclaimed. "I was thinking of the nymphs as I came through the groves, and how fittingly on such a

day their loveliness would adorn the woods. I know of few thoughts to surpass the beauty of these creatures of the Greek poetry, yet here is grace enough to make even their gentle bosoms throb with envy."

The smile of Poppæa displayed her dazzling teeth.

"'Tis a great thing to know how to speak so excellently well," she said. "Fabyan hath tried it all the morning; but while his lips speak to me he hath eyes only for Berenice. Yet I have welcomed her so gladly from the east that I forgive him. Thou hast heard of her adventures, her shipwreck, and marvellous escape from death? Since Fabyan championed her, and they had a wizard in their company, she is returned to help the court to a little life—and make Paulina jealous. 'Tis for that alone that I might find excuse for my love."

"Paulina?" said Fabyan. "Is it the Rhodian girl who loves Lucan?"

"No one loves Lucan but himself," said Poppæa, contemptuously, and then she laughed again. "But 'tis Paulina, Lucan's aunt, who trembles with rage when old Seneca comes to a banquet with Cæsar, and especially so since Berenice hath returned. Thou knowest how I love Seneca, and how he loves me?"

Brabano answered by a slight shrug of the shoulders.

"He is a bad man," continued Poppæa, "in spite of his morality, and Cæsar knows it. He was sent away to Corsica by Claudius for smiling too sweetly upon the daughter of Germanicus, and learned all his beautiful precepts during his absence. Do misers always have yellow teeth?"

"Is Scaveas a miser, and Seinthus?" laughed Berenice.

"And Seneca, of whom I spoke?—yes, all are misers. You should hear Tigellinus tell of them. He is the only man at court; he speaks right out."

"If we all spoke with the freedom of Tigellinus we might shortly speak no more," said Fabyan. "But,

however, I guard my tongue. I always think with the adorable Poppæa."

"Admirably said!" exclaimed Brabano, smilingly, letting his hand rest upon the shoulder of the young soldier. "Yet I have myself thought that Lucius Anneus Seneca, despite his wisdom, was at times indiscreet. We have something to pardon, however, to his southern blood, which we know to have a Spanish infusion. He hath outlived much of it, but, after all, to little purpose, if he cannot win the graciousness of the world's most lovely woman."

"Dost mean me?" asked Poppæa.

"Surely! I can think of no other woman in thy presence," said Brabano.

A call from one of her ladies attracted her attention, and as she paused to answer it, Brabano beckoned Fabyan away.

Answering, the young man followed him, and they proceeded along the white walk until they were alone. A marble seat rested under the drooping branches of a rose tree, its carved rails flanked by polyanthus and amaranth plants. It was a favorite haunt of the physician, and he paused.

"Sit down," he said to his companion, folding his toga about him and resting himself against the concave back of the seat. "Here is a spot for conversation to inspire even Lucan to eloquence.

"Where is the man to whom thou canst now be called patron—the man Paul?" he continued, when they were both at ease.

Fabyan laughed.

"I am scarcely ready," he replied, "to admit myself patron to a man like Paul. My youth, and his age and wisdom—"

"But thy dignity," said Brabano.

"Paul hath a dignity of his own," replied Fabyan.

"He hath a shop in the Subura, where he designs to make tents for the soldiers and sails for the smaller shipping. Zekiah could be more properly termed his patron, since he hath furnished the money for the venture, and applauded the man's disposition to be industrious. His home I know not, but it is among the Jews in the Janiculum section."

"Where one might lose himself," mused Brabano, "as readily as in the forests of Hylsatia. A great man, this Paul, and one to keep in mind."

"Art impressed by his teachings?" asked Fabyan, eagerly.

Brabano turned his expressive eyes upon the animated countenance before him. He answered slowly.

"Surely, I am impressed," he said. "Doubtless he believes what he hath told us. Sincerity is always entitled to respect."

"But thou — dost thou believe it?" asked Fabyan. "Was it truly so that Jesus Christ was God, and that after His death He arose in the flesh from the tomb, and that men saw Him?"

"Thou travellest far and fast," replied Brabano, with a laugh. "I said not so much. I answered thee that his teachings impressed me."

"But there is one here in Rome," said Fabyan, "whom Paul hath seen—one Peter, who was a disciple of the Christ. Peter it was who denied Him, and afterwards repented. He saw Him living after the crucifixion, and was present when Thomas put his finger in the wound made by the spear-thrust in his side."

"Had it not time to heal, this spear-wound?" observed Brabano, with a tinge in his voice. "It strikes me that the power that could throw off the chill of death might have closed in three long days a spear-wound of the flesh. Nay, pardon me," he continued as he noted the expression upon Fabyan's face. "I am

a philosopher, and mathematical; I leave poetry to the great Cæsar and Lucan, the youthful self-estimate. I have said that Paul was a great man, and this Peter—tell me of him."

"I have not seen him, but he hath been years in Rome. 'Tis he who hath gathered the following of which my uncle spoke. Paul's sturdy strength broke down as he told of him, and the strong man shed tears to mention even his name. 'Twas beautiful to hear him describe his person of sanctity, his hair and beard of pathetic whiteness, and his voice so mellow with feeling. Peter speaks by divine authority, and no ear hears unheeding."

Brabano's face was fixed in thought.

"And he is here—in Rome?" he asked.

"Paul spoke with him yesterday," said Fabyan. "His voice trembled as he told me of it."

"My Fabyan," said Brabano, after a time, a deliberate sedateness in his manner, "what thinkest thou of things at court? How stands the position of thy good uncle, and what is the future of thine own hopes? It seems to me that all things rest upon a certain insecurity, which should make good men consider. We have had much of the Cæsars, so much that the people take them as a fact, and, knowing nothing better, accept the situation as a normal one. Our own adorable Emperor is a Cæsar, accented by Tigellinus, with an Agrippina, a Britannicus, an Octavia in his past. It is hardly probable that he will grow in moderation. There is a suddenness about calamity, when it falls upon those out of his divine favor, that makes it hard to bear, especially for women, who by nature are capable of much grief."

Fabyan had listened with every sense acute. His surprise was boundless. He said nothing, and Brabano continued, calmly:

"I have in charge the health of the Roman destiny, so far as that destiny is Nero, and am licensed to speak

with greater freedom than another. Tigellinus might protest, in the manner in which Tigellinus does, and if Cæsar could overhear me I might speak no more. But Cæsar's voice shall be dumb when mine is a power through his dominions, and Rome will be Rome when the Cæsars shall have been forgotten."

"Thy meaning?" asked Fabyan, at last. "Dost forget that I am a soldier of Cæsar?"

"Nay," replied Brabano, "a soldier of Rome, I trust. But I remember that thou art a nephew of thine uncle, and I think, also, a lover of his adopted daughter, Myrrha."

Fabyan's face grew pale, but he repressed the start that brought him half erect, seating himself again, under the gaze of his companion, which seemed to burn into his breast.

"I know that the noble Tigellinus loves her also," said Brabano. "I would not mention it to one who had not the wisdom to understand its import, nor mention it at all, considering how it came to me, except to profit the girl herself. I have something of her image in my own heart, because of her loveliness and beauty—perhaps because of her helplessness in the face of a danger that besets her; and, seeing that she is of my people and may need my strength to aid her, I have looked upon her with the emotions of a father. My age justifies it."

"By Jupiter!" cried Fabyan, starting up, "thou mightst cry treason through the streets and come to me for shelter, after words like that. A lover of Myrrha! She is in my heart of hearts! If Tigellinus — if even Cæsar dared—!"

He paused, standing erect, his eyes expressive of his fury.

"I asked thee," said Brabano, "thy thought of the things at court. Canst thou imagine an act that Cæsar would not dare? He could put thee in a lion's den, and

invite thine uncle, with his family and all his friends of the senate, to come and see thee eaten. He might then put in thine uncle, with his family and all his friends of the senate, and invite Rome to witness the feast. I know of none beyond his malice, although I know of one who does not fear him. That which he might do for his own pleasure he could do for Tigellinus, if the knave would ask him. Thou hast not the imagination to think of that which Cæsar might not do, had he but the genius to conceive it. He holds the world at the disposition of his caprice; the senate convenes at his bidding, armies march and ships sail at his command, and the bread, and blood, and tears of countless people wait upon the turn of a stanza in his verse; and he is yet a boy in judgment, malice, pride, and aged in vice. Therefore, I asked thy thought of the things at court. Ay, I am impressed with what I have heard from this Jew, Paul, because all that I have thought and said are mild compared with the enormous treason of his speech. The man breathes treason; he is rebellion incarnate; nothing that is pleases him, and he hath established a theory and a story to fit his protest. My knowedge is vain if he doth not find followers by hosts, and thou must not be so small as to misunderstand him. Doth this tell thee how much I am impressed? Have I found words to indicate the importance I have attached to my brief knowledge of this man?"

The import of his companion's words came slowly to Fabyan's mind, and the delicious morning took on a sickly hue. The perfume of the garden oppressed his senses, and the color of the flowers seemed changed to blood. Tigellinus loved Myrrha! The horror of what that might mean to her and to himself overwhelmed him. And this cold reasoner of the court had penetrated the secret of his heart, and knew of the passion that he had not yet proclaimed to those to whom he was attached

—the secret which he had guarded almost from himself, because of the unworthiness he felt. Through the green arches of the bowers he could hear the laughter of the light crowd they had left, and its mirth seemed a mockery to his thoughts. Brabano's reference to Paul was lost to him; he heard it, but it was Myrrha who was in his mind.

"I have heard thee," he answered, finally, "but scarce know how I should reply; neither do I know thy purpose in making me thy confidant. What am I to do?"

"Wilt thou stand by and see thine uncle and his family lost? or the sweet child of thy heart sacrificed to the fate that awaits her at the palace, and thyself sent to some remote duty that will give thee up to death?"

"Doth such a fate await us?" asked Fabyan, his eyes gleaming ominously.

"Would I have risked speech otherwise?" answered the physician. "For what purpose?"

"I know not," replied the soldier; "and, if the warning be a true one, I thank thee. But Myrrha—hath she no refuge?"

His voice broke under his emotion, and the drops stood upon his brow.

"Dost know thyself of any spot on earth beyond the reach of Nero's power?"

"I see," said Fabyan, gloomily. "Thou wouldst make of me another Chærea. I stood upon the very slab this morning within the hall whereon Caligula lay under his knife. If thy words are true I could find the heart for the task."

"A Chærea, a Brutus, a Virginius, or any other of those that have glorified Rome! Thou hast said it, and the heavens have not fallen. A dead Nero is better than a live tyrant if the issue calls. But we shall not strike as bootlessly as Brutus, although as righteously as Virginius; and, mayhap, we strike not at all. But I

have told thee, and thou must think. What I have said is true; I swear it by the gods, and by thy love for Myrrha! Think deep and well and long upon my words, and say them not to Paul. No danger threatens that I shall not know, nor will I fail to watch and speak. Trust me, and be silent and discreet. In time I will make my purpose clearer, and meanwhile thou hast a friend at court. Dost trust me?"

Fabyan looked into his face and then put forth his hand. His brain was in a tumult, but he did not doubt. He knew that his uncle was not popular at court, and that Nero had grown cold; he knew that Tigellinus was envious, and hated the patrician blood that flowed in the veins of the Amici. That he should love Myrrha was more than probable. Who would not?

The revelation that Brabano had made required courage, and Fabyan was profoundly grateful, and he was likewise grateful for the promise of help proffered him. He felt his helplessness to that degree, and he was so deeply stirred by the thought of the peril to the object of his love, that he would have given his life to the man who had thus sought to warn him of her danger. Releasing with a hearty pressure the hand which clung warmly to his, he hastened from the garden, leaving to Brabano the task of accounting for his departure to Poppæa.

X

THE SHOP IN THE SUBURA

IN a street that opened upon a small space whose shops were devoted principally to the sale of leather, the Jew, Zekiah, possessed a house which he let for the purposes of trade. Its entrance was a wide one, the breadth augmented by double doors, which folded backward, and above was a long aperture for the further admission of light and air. At the back a stairway led to an upper story, the second chamber devoted to the purposes of storing the goods to be made and sold below, while to the rear various apartments looked upon an inner court, which was the common breathing-ground of the tenants who occupied the rooms for the purposes of living. The place was poor, but respectable, and here Paul, under terms with his rich countryman, had established himself in the business of a sailmaker. This was an occupation more generally carried on near the river, but tents were to be made, and the demand for awnings for domiciles and booths was likely to be great. In this view the shop of Zekiah was convenient to a centre of trade, for the slaves of the rich families from the neighboring hills came regularly to the Subura for the purposes of market. This street was also an avenue of traffic between the training-quarters of the gladiators and the arena; patricians often found their way there; the vicinity abounded with wine-shops, and the shrewd Hebrew who had become the landlord of the Apostle had counselled him wisely in the choice of a place for his vocation.

Huge piles of cloth lay on rude tables to the rear, and a space in the centre of the shop was devoted to the cutting and sewing of the fabrics which were to be fashioned into use.

He was yet under the surveillance of the centurion, Julius, now a member of a section of the Prætorian Guard, but the patronage of Fabyan, and the friends he had found in the city upon his arrival, had provided for his ample liberty. The home of Zekiah was at the base of the Esquiline Hill, but Paul had found an abiding place beyond the river, in the densely populated quarter of the Janiculum, where nightly he might lose himself in the design which possessed his soul. He had found the faith which he had come to preach already established. His was not to be the first voice lifted in the Eternal City to the glory of Him who had died upon the cross, though the field was fertile for his untiring energies. Peter the beloved was here before him, and the great Apostle moved as in a dream under the exaltation of his presence. Forward and direct, muscular and assertive, his nature had melted like the snow in the sunlight under the benign personality of one who had looked familiarly upon the face of the Saviour.

The Christian meetings were yet held in secret. It was the lowliest who had first embraced the faith, they who were deep in the squalor of the age, and felt the need of its saving power. The rich and high in place were least susceptible to a doctrine whose first message was to the oppressed, and sinners were readiest where fate was hard. The standard of the cross, destined to sway the world from the pinnacles of the Vatican, was first raised far down in its shadow.

It was towards the noon hour, but the Apostle had been early at his work. He had visitors, but they did not disturb him. He went humbly about his task, pausing to answer a question addressed to him, and

listening with indulgent humor to the conversation about him. Zekiah, fresh from a visit to his tenants, stood near the doorway, while, perched upon the bales at back, Ethelred rested at ease, a new cloak of scarlet folded about his arm, his long blade held between his knees. Beside him the huge form of Volgus reared itself, its good-natured visage alight with a new interest.

"I little thought this city of Rome a place for dreams," said the young man. "I should have left ere this, but I find myself lounging through the streets and looking at the palaces and temples as though they held a charm or spell to keep me always here. I will not account for it, except that I am depressed, perhaps, and miss the activity of a life more free. Thou must go to Brittany when thou art released, good Paul, and I will promise thee a royal welcome. When the games are over I shall say farewell."

"Thou shouldst go before, be that thy excuse for remaining, as much as we shall miss thee," said Zekiah. "They are no longer the games in which the good Volgus fought, and he should scorn them now. I could look upon the struggle while a man conquered a beast, without the quiver of a lash, although it was worse when men fought each other; but now, when they fling babes to the lions, under the pretence that they are criminals, and burn women under the charge of sorcery, the sight is not one to be borne with patience, even by a soldier. The Emperor is developing a new disposition, although I should fear to speak of it outside my own house."

"I shall go to Brittany," said Volgus, with a sigh that echoed through the room, his great chest heaving. "I shall go when my sweet mistress is wed. If I am out of the games, Rome is Rome to me no longer."

"Thou wilt win a greater victory, good brother," said Paul. "Thou wilt win salvation, and thenceforth God

will never see thee lose. I will go with thee to Brittany when thou art ready."

"I would it were now," said Ethelred. "It is a long journey alone. Rome is beautiful, but I know a sweeter air; it breathes freedom, too, and Zekiah might speak of Nero in any tone he pleased, and fear no peril."

"Thou wilt stay for the games, good prince," said the giant, laughingly. "Bad as they are, I counsel thee to see them. Since the noble Fulvia hath commended thee, and thou hast found favor in our household, one might understand and forgive thee dreams in Rome."

"Truly," piped Zekiah, his beard shaking as he joined the giant's mirth. "I have seen no fairer damsel than the gentle Myrrha. Her eyes are like the stars over Galilee, and her teeth like the pearls of Ophir. I should find a mite to help her dower from my own poor purse should she prove to be the object of thy dreams."

"Thou mightst save thy money, good Zekiah, and the prince may go when he will," said Volgus, dryly; "my mistress weds elsewhere."

"Truly?" observed Zekiah. "I heard it not. To whom?"

Volgus paused, and his face flushed.

"We have said enough!" he cried. "We have overstepped liberty already."

"Nay," said Zekiah, gently. "I am myself fond of the sweet child. God's blessings on her whenever she be wed!"

"So say I!" cried Ethelred. "I shall find mites enough for the dower of my bride, but 'tis not of Myrrha I dream. If I love her better than Fulvia it is because, perhaps, she is younger, though I confess she strangely attracts me. But I dream of no woman to make my wife, and yet, surely, if there be one who is fair—"

"Thou wilt find her," laughed Volgus, as Ethelred stopped, his eyes resting thoughtfully upon the floor.

Paul lifted his face from his work and looked at the young man attentively. His gaze was long and direct, and Ethelred, conscious of it at last, answered it by one of interrogation.

"Thou hast a strange resemblance to the girl of whom thou wert speaking—she whom I saw at the house of Lucius," said the Apostle, finally. "It hath impressed me. I have observed her closely, for the name she bears was once dear to me."

"Hast noticed that, also?" cried Volgus, with a start of surprise. "I'll swear, I thought to mention it myself. The prince hath a trick about the mouth that strangely calls to mind my young mistress. 'Tis a reason why he won upon me."

"Be that the reason," laughed Ethelred, "and I accept it gladly. I could take all such words as gross flattery did I not remember who speaks them. But I shall wait for the games. I spoke with a German to-day at the Imperial gardens. He stood at the gate, and, there being none within hearing, I accosted him. He hath been long from the Baltic Sea, while his companions are from the South. They speak his tongue, but not as I do, and the sound of the dialect his mother had made him leap in his helmet. He would have embraced me but for his armor, and I might win him to any treason. He was a gladiator when first taken, but slew a lion in the arena, and Caligula took him to the palace because of his height. He serves at the lower gate during the games, and promised me an opportunity to see the prisoners. He says that it is a rare privilege to speak with them as they go out to die. His name is Marcus."

"I know him," said Volgus. "He is with the guard attached to the person of the Empress. A good fellow and brave fighter, but, like thee, preferring the long sword. He was well out of the family; he would have been dead ere now."

"When Cæsar brought the Romans to my country they found the long swords short enough," said Ethelred. "That was before my day, of course, but my adopted grandsire hath a memory. 'Tis poetry to hear him tell of it."

"Thou hast travelled much for a young man," said Zekiah, "which means that thou hast seen much peril. It accounts for thy readiness and bearing. Thy father hath allowed thee much risk. How cometh it that thou knowest the Baltic tongue?"

"I found it on the way to Brittany," laughed the young man. "Said I not that I was half barbarian? Truly, I was born at a place that I have forgotten, and my present father is mine only through love. Thou knowest that, Zekiah?"

"No," replied the Jew, "not so much. I knew that the prince, thy father, adopted thee, but thought thee a son of his brother. When I met him years ago, in Gaul, to deliver the moneys of Seneca which thou hast brought home to return, he told me of thy growth and promise and his love for thee. But if not of his blood thou art prince of his name, and when thou art called to rule his province may it be in the name of the good God thou hast learned of here!"

"Amen!" said the Apostle.

"I shall rule in justice and without fear," said Ethelred; "when I have learned more, perhaps I may rule in the name of the God thou hast mentioned."

"Who comes?" cried Zekiah, suddenly.

A crowd had gathered in the street without. A litter borne by eight gaudily attired slaves had stopped before the door, and the occupant, without waiting for the assistance of the attendants who hastened to him, leaped to the ground. Without pausing, he stepped lightly across the intervening space of walk and entered the shop. His person glowed with light and health

and power. Conscious authority was in his eye, and each gesture was graceful with strength.

Zekiah bowed instantly down.

"Welcome, most noble lord!" he cried. "We are honored much."

"Art thou the tent-maker?" asked the visitor.

"I am he, my lord," replied the Apostle.

"I have visited at the house of Lucullus and saw some awnings with stripes. They were thy handiwork and pleased me well. Thou art to fit out my small villa, near at hand, to which a slave will direct thee. Some ladies are there, whom thou must suit in all things. This man"—and he turned and pointed to an attendant just beyond the entrance—"will tell thee more fully and pay thy price."

Paul bowed in silence.

"That cloth—that thou art cutting?"

"'Tis a sail, my lord," replied Paul. "My awning cloths are there."

He indicated with his hand the goods in rolls upon the tables.

"So," observed the visitor. "Do thy task well, and I may give thee further labor. Thou mayst make some sails for the galleys."

He looked about him, and the figure of Ethelred, yet sitting upon the goods in the rear of the shop, caught his attention. His eyes rested upon the person of the prince, noting his attire, his long sword, and his air of freedom and fearlessness. Their glances crossed and spoke a certain defiance. Something in the demeanor of Ethelred brought a flush to the cheek of the haughty visitor.

"I could see thy goods better," he said, "were it not for the person who obscures them. He doth not help thy business, since he seems loath to move. Stand by, fellow, or I will have my slaves pitch thee into the street!"

Ethelred dropped upon his feet, and, standing erect, surveyed the speaker coolly.

"It has not occurred to thee," he said, with provoking deliberation, "that thou mightst lose thy slaves in the attempt and be thyself thrown into the street. Is it Nero who speaks?"

The face of the visitor blazed with his rage.

"By Jupiter, it is!" he replied, as he turned to his followers. "Take him, knaves, and turn him over to the centurion at the prison by the statue of Pompey, with orders to keep him safely. It is my pleasure to deal with him later."

The long sword flashed in the air. The slaves rushed into the shop, and then their haughty master arrested them. As they paused in amazement, under his lifted hand, he stood, gazing curiously at his antagonist.

"By Jupiter! a nice game-cock," he said. "And that was a pretty gesture—and strangely familiar. What is thy name, fellow?"

"He is a prince, most noble lord, a son of the reigning Duke of Brittany," cried Zekiah, trembling with fright. "He is here with moneys that have been borrowed of the noble Seneca, but did not come to court, as he brought no tribute for the beloved Emperor. I know not why thou speakest for Cæsar, but, noble as thou art, be merciful."

"I am Tigellinus, the Prætorian prefect," said the visitor, slowly, his eyes still upon Ethelred. "Princes matter not to me."

Ethelred dropped his sword-point and stepped back with a low exclamation. The name "Lucenella" fell involuntarily from his lips. Tigellinus heard it, and the look of amazement upon his face deepened.

"What saidst thou?" he asked.

"Naught," answered Ethelred, troubled and hesitant. "I spoke not."

"Art mad?" replied Tigellinus, impatiently. "I heard thee. What saidst thou?" Then, searchingly, "Hast been in Sicily?"

Ethelred was silent. He returned his sword slowly to its sheath, and when he lifted his face his own cheeks were flushed.

"By Venus! my lord Tigellinus," he said, "thou dost strangely confuse me. I know not the word which I spoke, nor why I spoke it. If it startled thee, it startled me no less. I know not Sicily—and yet, it hath a familiar sound. Tigellinus—Lucenella," he continued, muttering the words to himself, and struggling as with some long-forgotten memory that would not be recalled.

The favorite of the Emperor laughed. He waved his followers back, and when they were without turned again to the occupants of the shop, his brow clear.

"Let us forget this, old tent-maker," he said to Paul. "Do the service I have enjoined upon thee, and thou shalt be paid well. I'll not molest the prince to-day. A gentleman so ready with his sword and quick to fight all odds hath a claim upon our courtesy and power. And thou, old Volgus! I did not see thee until thou didst thrust thy thick form before my slaves. Didst mean to get between them and my orders? A dangerous move, and worth all thy courage. Stick to thy friends, old fighter, and hoard the valuable life thou hast been saving these several years. Thou mayst yet be wholly disgraced, and die of a fever instead of before a sword. Whom art thou serving?"

"The noble general, Lucius Amici," replied the ex-gladiator.

"Humph! What did I say of thee?"

"Come, my lord!" exclaimed Volgus, laughing. "How about thy service?"

"Nay," said Tigellinus, lifting his hand. "Not for a

deserter of the ring. Thou mightst have won any favors, now that Nero reigns."

"I won all battles," replied Volgus, "and favor gave me freedom. My wants are few, and I love my mistress. What more?"

"Nothing, old Hercules, since that contents thee. Thou art fairly entitled to my good-will, and I give it thee. Stand, ho!" he called to his litter-bearers. "Good people, a fair day!"

With another quick and curious glance in the direction of Ethelred he left the shop, and was shortly borne away.

" 'Twas the grace of Heaven that saved us!" exclaimed Zekiah, piously, his eyes lifted upward and his sighs expressing his relief. "Oh, these men of strife!"

" 'Tis a fine rascal he is," said Volgus, "and a proper courtier. The prince did a good thing not to spit him on his long point. A moment more and we should have all run for a brief respite down the Tiber, with the guards from the palace hunting us out of the hollows."

"Is his name Sophonius?" asked Ethelred, thoughtfully.

"Truly," replied Volgus. "Everybody knows that."

"I do not know how I knew it," said the young man.

"Thou wouldst have known it better," laughed Volgus, "if thou hadst fixed it for the tomb. Well"—and he stretched his great limbs—"I was instructed to bring thee home to dinner, and since the noble Valentina echoed the instructions of my mistress, Fulvia, thou wouldst better come."

"Valentina!" cried Ethelred, his face lighting.

Volgus looked at the Apostle with a grimace that brought a faint smile to the serious face.

"These dreams in Rome," he said, "attend upon the

young, who see temples in the clouds and palaces in the shadows that play upon the river. I had them once when I was youthful, ere I was caught for the Roman games. Good-day to thee, Paul, and thee, Zekiah. I shall account for my charge to-night at the meeting."

XI

LOVE'S VOICES

FABYAN'S house was on the eastern slope of the Viminalis. The soldier lived alone and with a severity that was almost austere. In dimension his establishment rivalled that of Lucius, but its chambers were quiet and an air of deep reserve marked both house and grounds. His wealth was great—it exceeded that of his uncle—but he held it modestly, and, while generous and free, his days of lavish waste were gone. His earlier life had been different. Orphaned when young, upon the attainment of his majority he had begun a career which promised neither dignity nor length. His gaudy litters, his Arabian horses, his costly chariots, gilded with gold and ornamented with ivory carvings, his jewels and splendid robes, had made him the most conspicuous figure at court. A train of slaves followed him from theatre to arena, and none in the palace company that Nero was beginning to assemble wagered more recklessly upon the games or at the dice. Lucius regarded him with stern displeasure; Fulvia admonished him with the anxiety of a mother; but he was deaf to either command or entreaty; his youth vigorous, his person handsome, women smiling upon him, and fancying himself under the especial favor of the gods, he wasted his days at play and gave his nights to banquets and to love.

Octavia was then the wife of Nero. Tigellinus, fresh from his victories in the chariot ring, was just rising in Imperial grace, and Agrippina, empress-mother of the

youthful Cæsar, was regent, still in power. Lucius Amici retained some influence at the court, and Poppæa Sabina, the fickle wife of Otho, newly emerged from her chrysalis state, saw her beauty taking color in the Imperial eye.

Berenice came to Rome.

The sister of the Jewish King brought to the Palatine the strange flavor of a new clime. There was a warmth in her beauty, a depth in her glances, and a subtile meaning in all her arts that gave a new fire to passion. She set Phyllis and Poppæa astir. The court ladies followed her most eagerly; they braided their hair in the style of hers, and copied the wanton drapery of her robes; where fashion had suggested little, she made it promise much. There was a rush to her feet, and Fabyan, outstripping all others, went blindly to her service. She ruled him with the petulance of a queen. He was mocked by a thousand coquetries, as she warmed and chilled without reason. He hung his house with garlands, and kept feasts there which rivalled those of the court. He squandered his money for strange presents, bringing her slaves from Numidia and jewels from Susa. She set him mad with jealousy. She smiled on Festus, who was returned from his command in Dacia, and later upon Felix, who was made a tribune for services in Thrace.

The autumn games came on. It was a day upon which Volgus fought; the giant who found patronage in his uncle's household was to win his freedom if, with his short sword alone, and only his buckler for defence, he slew a Numidian tiger. Lucius was present, with his family, and Fabyan, in the train of Berenice, had seats near the podium of Nero. Felix, flushed with new honors and strong with the martial confidence of a soldier, had won a place near Berenice, and the blood went like fire through the veins of the youthful Roman as he saw

her gaze answer the rapt glances of his rival. The spectacle within the amphitheatre was lost to him; he had eyes only for the amorous pair. He scarcely heard the shout that welcomed the victory of the gladiator, nor saw him borne by the lictors before the Emperor. The great crowd grew as a mist to his disordered fancy and vanished from his sight. He saw only Felix, who saluted with his lips the white hand of Berenice, and then descended the stairs which led from the platform to the space behind the Imperial seat of state. Fabyan knew that he went to join the fashionable crowd that gathered beneath the podium to welcome the triumphant gladiator. Wild with rage, the young man followed, his heart smiting against his ribs, so furiously did it beat. An hour later he was found unconscious and bleeding at the foot of the stairway, and Felix had left the amphitheatre. In the days that followed both were silent, and though Berenice, full of curiosity and regret, sought to learn from them the story of a controversy, neither would speak. Felix returned to his duties with the legions, and Fabyan recovered, changed in character and purpose. He was humiliated by the weakness which made him so readily the victim of a stronger man and shamed by the outburst which had occasioned his defeat. He sold his litters, his horses, and many of his slaves, and began the study of philosophy with Statius Annæus; later, under the tutelage of Volgus, he attended the gymnasium at the training-school. He was seldom seen at court, and, while he still made show of a regard for Berenice, he drew gradually away from her influence. Felix was gone, and she sought with all her arts to hold the young man whom she had estranged, but Fabyan, cold now and impassive, petitioned Cæsar for a commission with the army. The youthful Emperor hastened to assent. He had noted, with his growing cynicism, the change in the lover of Berenice, and assigned him to

service in the field. The valor and intelligence of the young soldier made his progress rapid. He fought in Thrace and Illyria, and returned to Rome a conqueror and a tribune. In answer to the popular demand, and in accord with his own disposition to be generous, Nero gave him a procession of triumph through the streets. Strong now in the esteem of the people, and high in favor with the legions, Fabyan Amici had begun the simple life which he had lived up to the time of his meeting with Berenice again in Palestine.

He had left the Imperial gardens, following his eventful conversation with Brabano, in grave perplexity of mind. One thought was uppermost—Myrrha was in danger—Tigellinus loved her. He knew what the love of Tigellinus meant, and he knew also that the time had come when he must make his own feelings known. At last he must speak the words which had hung hesitatingly upon his lips. He knew now how much he loved Myrrha himself. He had been long conscious of this sentiment, held sacredly within himself, but now it surged and throbbed and moved throughout him with a heat and glow that was something like the intensity of his days with Berenice. But this passion was a holy one, immeasurably deeper than any feeling he had ever known, its fire softened and subdued by the gentle character of its inspiration. To him the white figure of the girl, so chaste of soul and feature, was as the alabaster image of a goddess upon an altar, to be worshipped with something like reverence. To compare the emotions with which she inspired him with the love which he had professed for Berenice was like an act of profanation. This sentiment oppressed him the more, since he had so recently renewed in part his former friendship. But the association had been different, although he had come to suspect that Berenice, unlike himself, rebelled at the influence of new emotions which

taught of a communion without reproach. He felt the change, but he was not conscious of redemption from either his memory or his past. To speak his love to Myrrha was like an offer to touch a priceless gem with an unclean hand. His life seemed to have hardened, and, added to the excesses of his youth, were the rude experiences of camp and march and bloody field.

Unattended by any servant, he left the Imperial gardens and went directly to his uncle's house.

Lucius and Fulvia were not at home, but he found Volgus in the court, playing at quoits with the slaves, and a maid told him that Myrrha and Valentina were in the garden. The woman who spoke to him was a favored companion of his aunt, with a speech and demeanor as free as though she were of his blood.

"Thou art well come," she said, with a smile. "Valentina will welcome thee most gladly, and perhaps Myrrha also, but more especially Valentina. The young Prince of Brittany is with them, and I am sure that Valentina will never look at Paulo again. He may go hang himself for any chances that are left to him now. Thou mayst see them through the door of the atrium if thou wilt. Valentina is carmine from breast to brow, and her laugh has been an echo each moment since he came. Truly, the girl is bewitched."

Fabyan passed through the atrium, and, following a walk, came upon them as they stood beneath an arbor. As the woman had said, Valentina was radiant, but Fabyan saw with a joy that made his heart leap that Myrrha advanced to meet him with an unusual welcome upon her face.

All doubt left him. Her smile swept away his caution and reserve; he would speak to-day. However unworthy, he loved—loved with all the intensity of his maturer years—and he would not lose this girl for the throne of Cæsar. If she were in danger, he could the

better protect her after a declaration of his passion; once his wife, if Tigellinus should look towards her he knew of one alternative that might avail to save her.

That she was in danger he did not doubt, in view of what Brabano had spoken; but standing in her presence, with the influence of her glorious face warming his whole being, the peril seemed afar off, and they stood together upon the brink of some mysterious paradise which they would enter hand-in-hand, and from which all evil would flee away. Myrrha seemed to feel his emotion, and her eyes lent him courage in response; and he, conscious that his face had made avowal of his love, waited as in a trance until the voice of Valentina aroused him.

"Father expected thee this morning, Cousin Fabyan," she said. "We waited dinner for thy coming."

"I am sorry," was his reply; "but thou hadst our noble guest in my stead. I trust," he continued, to Ethelred, "that thou wilt be long in Rome."

"Until after the games, at least," replied the young man. "My time is not hurried; I have little reason for a speedy departure further than that one hath a love of home."

"He hath little reason, indeed!" cried Valentina, scornfully. "I will warrant there are many reasons were he but honest with us. Are the maids of Brittany tall?"

Ethelred blushed with pleasure at her manner.

"I know not," he replied, "though they are fair. It seems to me now that all maids are fair. But, indeed, I have never so especially observed them in Brittany. Only since I have come to Rome doth it appear that there is something significant in the beauty of women. I am sure that I shall think much about it upon my return."

"'Tis a most dangerous subject to think about or talk about," said Fabyan. "Let us leave them, Myrrha,

by way of example. Truly, they are so self-satisfied that I doubt if they miss us at all."

"Thy pardon," replied Ethelred, bowing gravely. "I am—"

"Nay!" cried Valentina, touching his arm with the tips of her fingers, and interrupting his speech. "Let them begone and welcome. They will be glad enough to return to our company when they have wearied of each other."

She laughed, with her eyes sparkling, a laugh that was infectious. Her joyousness gave color to the day, and the young Briton looked upon her with an admiration that was undisguised.

Myrrha answered the request of Fabyan, and together they moved slowly down the walk, the merry jests of Valentina and Ethelred following. A turn in the path hid them from view, and scarcely were they alone when they were conscious of a mutual embarrassment. The silence which both for a time maintained gave to this emotion a strange emphasis, and then Fabyan spoke.

"How old art thou?" he asked. "I should know thy age, yet it seems to me but yesterday since thou wert a little child."

She stopped, and, seating herself upon a carved bench which rested against the trunk of a cypress-tree, looked upward into his face. Her hands were folded in her lap, white and beautiful against the snowy texture of her robe, and her dark eyes were luminous and full of confidence. His being thrilled anew.

"I am not yet twenty," she replied. "It also seems to me that my childhood was but yesterday. My days have been so full of happiness, however, since I have lived here, that I have been scarce sensible of any change, and yet—I am now a woman."

He dropped to the seat beside her and took both her hands in his.

"How lovely a woman!" he said, his voice low and thrilling. "It hath long been my desire to tell thee; and yet I cannot—I have not words sufficient. Thou art more than lovely — thou art more than beautiful! I love thee! I love thee—with my lips, my heart, my soul!"

His broken speech ceased under the look which he encountered. Her dark orbs were lustrous, and then diffused in the tears of joy that arose to them. The pressure of the little hands in his set him mad with delight, and he lifted them to his lips and covered them with kisses. His arm went about her waist; the acknowledgment of her whole being which he felt against his own, the little sigh of ineffable delight drawn from her at the submission of the strong man whom she had loved without the knowledge, and scarce the hope, that he would come with such passion to declare himself hers, enveloped him. His habitual reserve lost itself in the ecstasy of the moment, and his voice, sunk to a whisper, murmured again into her ear the story of his devotion.

XII

THE SUMMONS

FABYAN did not remain to confide to Valentina or Ethelred the story of his happiness. It was sufficient for the time that he knew it himself, and when he had returned to the house with Myrrha he went away with a supreme lightness of heart. As he departed he met his uncle returning. Fulvia was not with him. He had left her at the house of a friend where she habitually visited, and had gone to the Palatine for an interview with the Emperor. He wished to be relieved of the duty of apprehending the Christians, and desired Nero to give it in charge of some one else. "He was getting old," he had averred, "and had already rendered Rome much service. There were those, younger than himself, who, if not more to be relied upon, were more active. He desired rest."

Nero had received him graciously and with respect. He heard his request in silence, and when it was finished signified his assent. "He would consult with Tigellinus," he said, "and name some younger man for the office."

The matter was not one of moment, and Nero was, in truth, relieved. He was glad to be rid of an official relationship with Lucius, against whom the influence of Tigellinus had been steadily exerted; and he himself had grown daily more suspicious. Further, the significance of the Christian movement was not known at court, and but little in patrician Rome. Evidence of its growth in Judea had been reported, but this excited no

interest; it was essentially a Jewish movement, and of little import outside the small boundaries of Palestine. Emissaries, like the great Apostle, had carried it into many countries, and Paul himself had preached it at Antioch, Ephesus, Thessalonica, and elsewhere; Peter was now in Rome, but in the masses of the Imperial City it had made foothold only among the lower orders and the Jews. It was not a movement to be feared, though one to be suppressed; this was because it incited disorder and was peace-disturbing in character. Anything which tended to band the plebeians together, excite the interest of the slaves, and distract the attention of the soldiers was something to be suppressed, and since the followers of the alleged Christus preached some distinct creed that obtained a following, particularly as they were said to be incendiaries and haters of the public games, they were criminals to be severely punished. Criminals of the lower order, and those opposed to the games, made excellent material for them; and in this view Nero, as an incident in the beginning, and Tigellinus, with more directness, had proceeded against them.

The business over, Nero had inquired after the health of Fulvia, and then invited Lucius to remain and meet Poppæa. With grave thanks the old general had declined. The inquiry and the invitation were in that colorless tone which was formal merely, and with Nero had the suggestion of a warning. Lucius had pleaded an indisposition and hastened away.

Fabyan did not immediately tell him of his confession to Myrrha, but his kinsman saw that something unusual had happened. The glow upon his cheeks, and the suppressed and nervous excitement under which he labored, would have drawn an inquiry, but at the moment Valentina and Ethelred appeared in the vestibule. Here, too, were evidences of excitement, but Lucius did not

question them. Gratified by the result of his mission, he hastened to tell of it.

"It is a relief," he explained, "to be spared from the further duty of hunting down these poor wretches, the grievousness of which hath lain heavily upon me since I listened to the words of the good Jew. Truly, Fulvia hath slept but little, she hath taken the matter so much to heart. Cæsar was gracious, and released me from service without delay."

Fabyan's face grew instantly grave. The remembrance of Brabano's words, which he had forgotten in his joy, came back to him, smiting upon his breast like the blows of a mace. He now recalled that the physician had said too little, and instantly resolved to seek him again and question him further. It was intolerable not to know the imminence of the peril under which they rested. Exalted by the love which had grown fiercer under confession, his rebellion was now boundless. In spite of his discipline, for the moment, he was capable of any rashness; if Tigellinus dared to lift an impious finger in the direction of his love he would lay him a corpse at the foot of Cæsar's throne!

Soon the words of Ethelred gave a new trend to his thoughts.

"It is a pleasure to see thee here," Lucius was saying to the young man, in a kindly tone. "As I have told thee, thy people are noble foes. In my younger days I have marched over all of Brittany and crossed the channel to the island beyond. Hast been there?"

"To Angle-land, of the crooked shores and chalk cliffs?" replied Ethelred, with a smile; "verily, to its uttermost northern point. Beyond its mountains the Romans have never been, and it can boast valleys as fair as Italy—at least, I think it. Its people are fearless; they are unconquered, broad of heart and hospitality; and even the first Cæsar found it wise to set a limit to his

conquest. There is yet an island beyond, where live a Celtic people of whom Rome knows not at all. Ay, I have been there."

"Alas for the Roman women!" exclaimed Valentina, with a sigh. "It is the favor of men alone to see far countries and travel from home. I would see this Brittany."

The eyes of Ethelred flashed. His cheeks reddened as his heart grew bold.

"Perhaps thou mayst, some day," he said.

"Nay," observed Lucius, waving his hand in the direction of the inner chambers of his house, and smiling good-humoredly; "there is danger in travel for women, and she must content herself with the nest I have prepared for her. It hath cost me some years and much labor."

"'Tis a splendid one," muttered Ethelred, despondently, as his eyes covered the carving and the statuary, the sweep of tessellated wall and mosaic floor.

"Forever, my father?" asked Valentina, with assumed petulance.

"Until thou art wed," he replied, fondly, his arm about her waist, "and thereafter, if thy mother choose the man."

"She hath done well so far in her choosing," laughed his daughter, looking at him with affection and admiration, and then turning her eyes in the direction of Ethelred. "I think I shall be dutiful, and trust her."

Fabyan concluded not to speak now, but, bidding adieu to his kinsman and the light-hearted pair who were with him, bent his steps in the direction of his own dwelling. He wanted quiet, with opportunity to reflect upon the situation, and to think also upon his fierce and sudden happiness.

Reaching his house, he dismissed the attendant who came to inquire his wants, and, throwing aside his toga

and sword, walked through the wide rooms and into the garden. He was a prey to conflicting emotions—his love for Myrrha and his fear for her—his fear for himself, now that he had declared his passion and found it returned. Danger had been without significance to him, and no fate could disturb his thoughts, but Myrrha loved him, and the prospect of to-day pointed a vista of heaven that he had not now the courage to lose.

His restlessness increased. He threw himself upon a couch to think of his past, his youth, his dream of Berenice, and his days of folly. How substantial now would be the joy that would give as mistress to his magnificent dwelling the fair creature who had trembled in his embrace and whose heavenly face had grown crimson under the fervor of his kiss! How her presence would light up the dreary rooms of this palace, and how wide he would throw its halls and chambers to the world, decking it anew with the garlands and gayeties faded in the sober life of his recent years! His veins ran fire under his reflections as the image of his love grew in his mind. He thought of her hair, her lips, her neck, with its suggestion of snowy bosom; he remembered the grace with which she moved and the contour of a form ravishing and subtile in the magnanimity of youth. His later restraint and the curb under which he had held himself but served to feed the fires that glowed within him, and reason struggled vainly with impatience as he resolved to hasten with the utmost speed the day of his marriage. He would force the issue with Tigellinus; he would contest with him, in spite of his power, his claim for a wife in this tender and adorable creature against the pallid and bedizened person he would make of her at the Imperial feasts. The thought sickened him, and with it came a clearer sense of the nature of the peril. With the hint that he had received from Brabano, it needed only this hour of reflection to let him fully realize the scope and

fulness of the favorite's designs. The ways of the court were known to him. Octavia had perished and Acte had been set aside; Nero's methods were those of Tigellinus, and the favorite had only to suggest his wishes to gain Imperial assent.

The words of Brabano which suggested treason gave him but faint hope; Cæsar's power was not to be resisted; conspiracy could not grow as fast as the evil rapidity of the favorite's desires. Fabyan measured the impatience of Tigellinus by his own heated condition of mind, and his love augmented his fears. But if Cæsar's power was not to be resisted, it might be thwarted; cunning might avail to save them, and Fabyan thought of those whose only weapon of defence was their ability to flee and hide. The masses and their mode of life, the common people constituting the countless thousands of Rome, had never interested this vested patrician, born to the purple and linen of authority. Now, a thought of their life and what it meant appealed to him. After all, it was they for whom Rome stood and for whom the empire moved. The thought fixed in his mind, and how small seemed the court, how insignificant its few sickly figures, who danced and leaped and sported, as grinning and ghastly creatures, over the great, sober multitude going the daily way of labor and of rest! There was a majesty in their mere existence which he had never before recognized, far above any painted grandeur which surrounded the foolish Cæsar. The common life meant something; it had to do with the holy feeling with which Myrrha inspired him, as against the feverish emotion which Tigellinus felt for her. Paul was of the people; and the Master, of whom he spoke!—His teaching, as recited by the Apostle, came very close to the spirit which looked at Fabyan from the eyes of the girl he loved. The thought had never suggested itself to him that he might be effaced, or blotted out of the only life

he had known, and find a new and different existence in a valley too obscure for the vision of the court to penetrate. But here might be safety for Myrrha, if not for him. Any lot shared with her, however remote, would be heaven enough.

He determined to seek Brabano again, and later to see Paul.

Even as he made this resolution a slave appeared before him to announce a visitor; a centurion of the guard was without and begged to see him.

Fabyan was startled, and paused to gather his strength and presence of mind. He was in a condition to start at shadows.

The visit of a centurion from the court was always ominous. It was invariably for an arrest, and this, to a patrician, meant all of the serious consequences which might flow from the anger of omnipotent Cæsar. The blow he dreaded had fallen quickly, and the soldier turned pale and ground his teeth with impotent rage. He, the one man who was to protect and shield Myrrha from danger and disaster, was first to be dealt with—was to be put away where he would be powerless to serve her. So full was he of the thoughts of the past few hours that he could not reason with his accustomed clearness, and failed to see that the presence of the centurion could not relate in any manner to Myrrha. Whatever might be the designs of Tigellinus, they could not take Fabyan into account, for until to-day he could assume no responsibility for the adopted daughter of his kinsman, nor was it generally known that she had engaged his heart. It did not follow that because the keen eyes of Brabano had discovered his secret that others had fathomed it also; but Fabyan, with nothing in his heart but Myrrha, could not separate her at this time from any event which related to himself.

Bracing himself to meet whatever emergency pre-

sented, he cast his toga over his tunic, and, donning his sword, bade his slave admit the centurion and his guard to the inner vestibule.

"He is alone, my lord," said the slave, in surprise. "He hath no guard."

Fabyan laughed, amused at the conclusion to which his disturbed thoughts had led him. There was little menace in such a call: a favor, doubtless, sought by some soldier known to him who desired promotion.

"Admit him here," he commanded.

The slave withdrew, and soon returned, followed by the centurion Julius.

"A fair day, my lord!" was his greeting. "I am concerned about a matter of which thou knowest, and have come to beg thy counsel."

Returning his greeting, and motioning him to a seat, Fabyan bade him proceed.

"Thou knowest how I brought the Jew Paul from Cæsarea, following his appeal, and have had him under my watch since? He is summoned upon the morrow to appear before Cæsar, and I am ordered to present him. I remember that the noble Festus declared that he might go acquitted, but since I have returned to Rome I have learned of other things that are different. Paul is a Christian, and they are arresting Christians and putting them in prison here. Many will be sentenced to death by the beasts, for they have incurred the anger of the Emperor. Thou knowest Paul. He will avow himself to Cæsar and be lost. I remember that he found favor with thee upon our passage, and the noble Berenice and her women were likewise kindly. I have myself a good feeling for him, and thought to tell thee of the summons and ask thy influence at court."

Fabyan noted the agitation of the stern soldier, and marvelled to see the softening at his eyes. The request touched him deeply, for he saw another manifes-

tation of the influence which Paul seemed everywhere to exert.

Relieved as he was by the nature of the soldier's message, Fabyan recognized the force of his suggestion; Paul *would* avow himself, and the Christians were in disfavor. He was silent for a moment, and reflective. Since his uncle had to-day divested himself of the office, and it was known to Nero that he, Fabyan, had travelled in company with Paul to Rome, any intercession which he might make in the Apostle's behalf might do him injury rather than good. This was more than likely, since in his mind Fabyan was full of misgivings as to the Imperial sentiment towards himself. But Berenice might be helpful, and the interest of Brabano might be enlisted; at all events, he would lose no time.

Thanking the centurion for the information he had brought, and promising at once to interest himself in the Apostle's behalf, he dismissed the soldier full of confidence and gratitude. Then ordering his chariot, he drove at once to the Palatine to see Berenice.

XIII

BRABANO AND THE APOSTLE

THE summons which bade Julius, the centurion, bring the person of Paul before the Imperial presence was without serious import, except for the facts mentioned by the soldier to Fabyan. Upon his arrival in Rome, the centurion had delivered his credentials to the prefect at the Palatine, and taken his orders regarding his charge. The orders were to keep Paul in safety until such time as Nero should see fit to hear his appeal. This was unlikely to be soon. Public business of every character was irksome to the Emperor, and he threw upon his ministers all the burdens of government, performing only those special duties which he could not delegate to another. He might readily have forgotten the obscure appellant from Festus, in Judea, but for the resignation of Lucius, which called the matter to the attention of Tigellinus. The favorite, having always in mind his own position and advancement, kept himself fully informed by trusted spies of all things likely to be of importance, and the petition of Lucius to be relieved of his duties brought to his mind the appeal of the Jew who had journeyed with Fabyan Amici and Berenice to Rome. Paul was a Christian; Tigellinus remembered that Brabano had said it, and, while he designed to keep faith with the physician, he desired to see the man who had excited so powerful an influence in his behalf.

Thus it was that he issued the order which the cen-

turion took to Fabyan, and which sent the latter in quest of Berenice.

Upon his arrival at the Palatine, Fabyan found that Berenice was gone. She had accompanied Poppæa upon a chariot ride on the Appian; so, bidding his own chariot wait, he made his way to the apartments of Brabano. He was admitted at once, and, following the slave sent out to conduct him, he was surprised, when ushered into the presence of the physician, to find Paul there also.

The apartment was one which overlooked a portion of the Imperial gardens, and large seats were drawn to a wide and circular window, which opened upon a curved balcony. Brabano and Paul had both arisen at the announcement of his coming, and stood awaiting him as he entered, the face of the Apostle expressing something of relief as well as pleasure.

"Welcome!" cried Brabano, making room for him at the seats. "Thy coming is most timely, since the meeting with our friend is by chance merely. As I stood at the gateway of the garden he passed for a walk in the afternoon air, and I invited him here."

Fabyan looked from one to the other, marvelling at the accident which had brought the Apostle at such a time to the palace. Following the greeting, he took the seat offered him, and as he sat between them Brabano continued:

"I have told our friend of the summons for to-morrow, of which fact I have just learned, and have assured him of what poor influence I can extend in his behalf. He, of course, relied upon thine already."

"My errand was upon his account in part," said Fabyan, relieved to find that the physician was already informed of the matter. "I was alarmed for him because an appearance before Nero at such a time is not a thing to be lightly regarded. Of this thou hast doubtless

spoken. We may need the good offices of Berenice also, unless Paul elects to be silent."

The Apostle smiled grimly.

"I am somewhat thy elder," he said, "and I endured for quite two years an experience with Felix."

"Nero and Felix are not the same," replied Fabyan, "and younger though I be, I know the former better than thou. I have a certain memory of Felix in which I have commended him always to Pluto, but would it were he before whom thou shouldst go to-morrow. What said the Emperor, my Brabano, when he told thee of the order?"

"It was the noble Tigellinus and not the Emperor who informed me," was the reply, and Brabano noted the lowered countenance of the soldier as he heard the name. "I had already spoken to him in behalf of our friend, so he warned me of the time when the appeal came on for hearing."

"What have I to fear?" asked Paul, calmly.

"The good Tigellinus," replied Fabyan, grinding his teeth. "If he should question thee thou must speak falsely, to escape."

Again the Apostle smiled.

"I recognize my peril," he said, "if that be the condition."

"He hath a beast in training," observed Brabano, quietly, "worthy of especial mention and of thy especial memory; Cæsar hath spoken of it also. Among the thousands in the dens of the amphitheatre there is a lion he hath named Caligula. The beast is a mountain of bone and flesh, all muscle from tooth to tail, and his special office will be to lead the pack against the Christians. We shall save thee from such a fate, good Paul, but thou must temper thy speech to our suggestion. I told Tigellinus thou wert a Christian to keep thine honesty intact, but made excuses that set him off his guard."

"I would not purchase safety, with the throne of Cæsar added," said the Apostle, "if I did it by deceit. I know already that it is my blessed fortune to suffer death in my Master's name; the hour He will fix. When my message here is spoken it will be time. I have no fear."

"Death," observed Brabano, "is a prospect which no man should invite. It hath a most loathsome environment if we keep it from the pyre. Worms seek the body, and the most delicate sister of Venus smelleth foully. The lambent sparkle goeth from the eye, and the voice of music is mute forever. I find no haven beyond the stars, and have heard no voices from Olympus. Dark and chill and cold, the tomb is the gateway to oblivion, and the proud spirit, with ambition quenched, hath lost the aspirations of color, love, and light in sodden nothingness. Who flies to such a fate?"

"I," said Paul, "if thou speakest of death; at the proper time I shall welcome it gladly. All men have dreamed of immortality, yet, like thee, have seen it not. Jesus, of whom I spoke to thee, doth give it. Color, love, and light are but faint perceptions of the joys which wait for him who dies in Christ."

"'Tis not a part of our Jewish faith," said Brabano.

"No, although it comes in supplement," said Paul. "Why turn away from the only hope which man hath found since Adam?"

"We should not," answered Brabano; "but earth makes a good kingdom, and hath choice advantages of certainty. Look into the garden through the window; our senses would swoon in the presence of a more sumptuous heaven."

"How many hath such a garden?" was the severe response. "I walked through it without a knowledge of its beauty, because its flowers have no message for

the people for whom Christ died. Yet God hath loved this world, since He sent His Son to save it."

"Let us aid Him, then," said Brabano, smoothly, unheeding the stern and rebuking eyes. "Let us extend these gardens until they reach throughout the empire, and let us take the people He died to save into a common brotherhood. Thy religion hath merit beyond compare. Indeed, I had heard of it before, although I mentioned it not. The name of Christ was early brought to me, when I was humbler than now; but while I felt its spell—while I studied it deeply and my admiration bowed down—I saw its danger and knew that it stood between me and what I have since become. But now I welcome it and thee, and I know what we may do together. That philosophy is broad which teaches a common love, and a religion of charity will involve the world. Thou seest how I have listened and understood? It is speedily done, too, if we are wise, and fate itself makes our conditions. The earth hath become one country; Rome hath made it so. All peoples bow to a common sovereignty and take their mandates from the spot whereon we sit. 'Tis a mighty ear prepared for a convincing voice, and that thou hast. Speak the words, and we shall rule the world!"

Fabyan gazed at the physician in astonishment. Brabano had spoken slowly at first, but, impelled by his theme, his voice had risen until his words thrilled. Here was the meaning of his suggestions of the morning. Since he had heard from Paul the doctrine of a rebel, he was declaring a treason of his own.

"Softly," replied the Apostle, who had looked steadily at the animated countenance, his own never changing under the vibrant voice or the words which it spoke. "God is the author of the religion which I teach, and His Son, not we, is to redeem the world. Whether or not Rome hath prepared the way matters little to Him who

holds the seas in the hollow of His hand. What wouldst thou of me?"

Brabano looked through the open window, his eyes now quiet. For a time he continued in an attitude of reflection.

"I would know thy purpose better," he replied, at length. "This in order that I may help thee the more. This Jesus—whom thou callest the Master—possessed He not certain powers over the spirits of darkness?"

"He possessed all power," replied Paul. "The beloved Peter saw Him change water into wine, saw Him feed a hungry multitude with naught but a few small loaves and fishes, saw Him make the leper whole, and raise the dead as from a sleep. The ruler of things material hath all dominion over them."

"Moses possessed such powers," observed Brabano, musingly; "and there was the rod of Aaron. Fabyan hath told me of certain wonders done by thee," and he turned his large eyes upon the Apostle. "One who is proof against the bite of a serpent hath, perhaps, little fear of the judgment of Nero."

"Truly!" cried Fabyan, joyfully, having listened with growing amazement to the conversation, relieved by a sudden thought. "Thy wisdom, Paul, and these strange powers of the East, may save us all. What need to die in the arena, or fear Tigellinus, if we possess them"

"Right!" cried Brabano, his eye again flashing. "Thou hast my thought, my Fabyan; therein lieth not only power, but safety—the way of peace for me and thee and all thou lovest—for Paul, and all his hopes. When we have deposed the captain and seized the tiller, we have the galley; with the general slain and the inner citadel taken, we may rule the city; the palace and the senate are Rome, and if we master Rome we rule the world!"

An almost imperceptible smile flashed in the beard of Paul, and then his features were again stern.

"I have said that I am without fear," he observed.

"Truly; but why needst thou go either to death or martyrdom?" asked Brabano. "Possessed of thy Master's strength, thou mayst make of His religion a command and not a plea—enforce it by power, not supplication; and as for Cæsar, he, after all, is as one possessed by a devil."

"Nay, the word is the word," said Paul. "It shall be as Christ spoke it. He conquereth by love, not fear, and His appeal is to the heart of man. What are the needs of the people He would seek?—to do mercy, to know love, and have charity."

"Then we shall make them powerful," said Brabano, drawing his form erect and spreading his majestic shoulders; "being powerful, they will do mercy; we will lift them above peril, and they will know love; and when we have given them the earth, they will do charity. This will not be with a Cæsar on the throne and the legions marching at his orders. I will welcome thee, good Paul, and aid thee. Thy mission hath found a friend at Rome. Born, as thou sayest, at Bethlehem, thy Master well might wish the world a Jewish kingdom. Let thy mind dwell upon it—from Brittany to Palestine, from Germany to Egypt—an empire of Jews! We might build upon these seven hills a palace to stretch to heaven, mocking the tower of Babel. With half the wealth this feeble despot squanders the sea might be alive with Hebrew sail; each citizen should be a soldier, but make his camp at home; we should parcel the days of the month, alternate to the trade of war and labor. We should found a college in each country to teach the people loyalty to Rome, and in Rome a college to teach them loyalty to us. Is it not a picture to barter for a Nero and his circus?"

Fabyan sat under the spell of his words. He saw a hope in the deep sentences of the physician which inspired him. The Amici had friends, and in the senate were many fearful and discontented men. The traditions of the city were filled with the names of tyrants who were slain, and the army would follow any leader with the strength to raise a banner. He was himself popular with the legions, and it would not be difficult to sow sedition among the young officers who might find their ambitions served by a change of state. Brabano was not a man to speak without warrant, and his words suggested a deep-laid plan, doubtless wellnigh perfected, with confederates secure. The young soldier understood his appeal to the Apostle. The Jews were numerous in Rome and vicinity, and the people believed in spells. Paul could preach an uprising among the very class most likely to influence the army, and Brabano, recognizing a truth in his doctrine and feeling his magic influence, understood how potent it would be to move the masses. Fabyan remembered to have heard Brabano once declare to Seneca that religion was the mother of motives, and a new creed, associated with the gospel of rebellion, might make such an empire as he had just pictured.

While Fabyan had been thus moved, Paul had listened with no evidence of emotion, his eyes resting gloomily upon the floor. He was unaffected by the words which had stirred Fabyan, and the seed of the physician had fallen upon stony soil.

The Apostle had outlived ambition and earthly hope. With eyes wide opened he saw the mockery of the world, its vanity and shadow. He sat now within the palace of the Cæsar, before a garden that exhaled the perfumes of Araby, only to find himself in the presence of anxiety and fear or ambition and further longing. Even Nero, who was despot of the world, seeking now amid

the gildings of the roof which stretched over them to mend his galled stomach for a feast of to-night, was racked by ceaseless unrest, discontent driving him constantly to vice; and the women, who made the palace beautiful, were filled with envy and uncharitableness, living from day to day on the stuffed sweets that would be poison on the morrow. From the Cæsar to the leper healed by Christ, the pinnacle and foot of earth's poor types—both sad creatures of a brief space in destiny—there was scarce the difference of a wish, the tinselled habiliments of stupid grandeur having naught whatever to do with those attributes of the soul which alone made life worth God's attention. What cared he for throne or empire? His eyes had seen the glory of the Lord of Hosts! His ear had heard the voice which made music for the spheres! His mission was to point the way for others to redemption, and even Cæsar was an object for his interest if he listened to and heeded the words of the Redeemer. Nightly he was preaching the gospel, and basking in the presence of Peter, the beloved disciple. Nightly, when the saint arose, pushing back from his white brow the snowy hair upon which the eyes of the Saviour had rested, and in a voice now grown feeble, told, with the confidence of one who had seen, the story of the Master, the stern voice that had thundered in Macedonia was hushed, the high spirit that had dared death in the Temple at Jerusalem was humbled—Paul, the dauntless, was as a little child, his full heart as meek as those of whom Jesus had said, "of such are the kingdom of heaven." Brabano, with his field of vision, might tempt in vain. The physician was himself the creature of a destiny of which Paul was certain. Already the Apostle saw in part the fruition of his work, and in the pictures which formed themselves before his eyes upon the marble floor the figures of both of his companions moved. But however his prophetic sight had

marked them, he knew the future and its object; there was no miscarriage in the gospel which he taught.

"I have heard thee carefully," he said, at last, arising and preparing to take his leave. "I will hear thee further when thou hast the time and humor. I thank thee also."

"We shall be with thee upon the morrow," replied Brabano, making no effort to detain him. "We shall prepare, as best we may, for thy appearance before Cæsar."

"I have no fear," repeated the Apostle, his eyes now shining kindly. Then he stopped, and, resting his hand lightly upon the robe of Brabano, he asked:

"What was the name, didst thou say, of the lion at the arena—the beast which is to lead the pack against the hapless ones to perish?"

"Caligula," replied the physician, mystified, as was Fabyan, by the manner of the Apostle.

"I will not forget," said Paul. "I shall remember it when I pray. Perhaps, also, it is something we should all remember. Farewell."

Fabyan remained with Brabano for a further word, after the Apostle had taken his departure, but both, impressed by his demeanor, looked after the sturdy form as it passed along the walks of the garden towards the gate.

XIV

THE BLOOD OF THE HOUSE OF HEROD AGRIPPA

A MOMENT later, following the departure of Paul, Fabyan himself left the apartments of Brabano to go in search of Berenice. He did not make this design known to the physician, but he was sensible of the peril which threatened the household of his uncle and himself as well. He thought, therefore, to appeal to one whom he knew to be high in the Imperial favor, and of whose interest and sympathy he was certain. During the long voyage which he and Berenice had recently made together on the vessel that also carried Paul to Rome, he had been both loyal and discreet. He had exhibited to the capricious princess of the house of Herod Agrippa an appreciation of what they had once been to each other, and a memory of all that it had meant to him; he had been courteous, gentle, and her cavalier each day; but in no manner had he betrayed the faith of Myrrha. Honest and sincere himself, he forgot that part of his past which should have enlightened him fully regarding Berenice. He should have remembered it in spite of her earnest glances, because she gave him cause to suspect the fire at her heart. He knew her vanity and understood that she was resentful of the control which he maintained for himself, but there had been a present motive for his conduct. This was outside his love for Myrrha, or any desire to keep himself whole. Paul had been with them; his influence was convincing, and Fabyan could not believe that

Berenice had escaped it. It should have chastened her memory of their old relationship. He had been so young and a victim of such readiness. But with Berenice a man was impressive always, and in his presence the long lashes drooped and her manner grew caressing and inviting. Such was her nature, ingrained and characteristic, with the added habit of all her days. While Fabyan could not guess the exalted mission of the Apostle, and while, as yet, he had but a narrow conception of its scope and meaning, he yielded to Paul's influence, and he believed that Berenice had yielded also. And if there yet might linger in her mind some traces of her former wantonness, she could not be wholly insensible to the beauty of the Apostle's teachings. He forgot the nature of the woman, or he did not know it, and he forgot, also, that her state of mind was not to be judged by his. He had once loved her and found her false; if she had loved him, however weak the sentiment, until she had discarded him, he had been true. He could summon no regrets, because his heart had filled itself so bountifully with a love that was all-satisfying; but she, with the vanity of a lifetime, which was now without a worshipper, might well seek to call again to her side the Fabyan whom she had once dominated. And she would do it in a woman's way and with a woman's wiles, losing nothing for lack of cunning, and missing neither occasion nor opportunity.

Fabyan Amici thought little of this. His knowledge of woman was not profound; his experience had been limited to a coquette and her antithesis; his other associations had been without significance. He was not a philosopher like Brabano. As he had grown out of the days of Berenice, and made up his wisdom, he had developed it about the duties of a soldier. Bold and brave, impetuous as he was, he was a child in all of that knowledge relating to those disingenuous arts of which Bere-

nice was mistress. He felt this to some extent, and, therefore, had confidence in the assistance she could render him. He purposed to conceal nothing from Brabano, but he could not afford to neglect any aid; he would pursue his adherence to the physician, but having gained a respite through the influence of Berenice, he would be the better equipped to assist him. He, once so powerful in himself and his family, would have scorned to intrigue through the Empress for his own safety, but for Myrrha he would go to any lengths.

So thinking, he halted in the corridor before the door of the apartments of Berenice, overjoyed to find that she was now within; she had returned from her drive.

The maid who announced him returned after a discreet interval. Following her guidance, he was ushered through the drawn curtains. The spacious chamber evidenced the luxurious tastes of its occupant—the woman who now smiled at him with dazzling eyes from a great seat in the centre, in which she sat almost as upon a throne. It was apparent that the time was propitious, and his hopes rose; in the graceful attitude in which she had placed herself, in the sweep of her garments, which she had arranged with due regard to his coming after he had been announced, in the tint upon her cheeks, which heightened as he approached, he saw that he was welcome. With a wave of her hand she dismissed her attendant, and they were alone.

"Be seated, my Fabyan," she said, indicating a couch immediately to her front. "It is a pleasure so great to see thee thus that I would make the most of it. I have much neglect of me with which to reproach thee. I remember only the scant hour in the gardens where we were not alone, and from that thou didst hasten away without word to me. How hast thou fared now that Rome is again familiar and thou hast settled into routine once more?"

He answered her manner with a like spirit.

"Thou knowest the fortunes of a soldier in these days of Nero," he answered, with a smile; "they vary, but a man should take defeat with victory. I could stand defeat, although I have known little of it; but in some contests one needs a woman's aid to win. I have come to ask a favor."

She let her eyes droop with the movement that he knew so well, her demeanor grown soft and winning. Her voice fell as she replied, and in its tones he saw that she was the Berenice of old, sensuous, seductive, and breathing danger in every languorous movement that wafted perfume from her luxurious person. He was too much a man, with his knowledge of her atmosphere and of her, not to be impressed by her manner. It had in it too much which he remembered. He felt a sense of disappointment. His own development since the days of their experience had been on a higher plane. He had grown in truth and integrity of character, and his consciousness of his greater worth had augmented since Paul had brought a spiritual knowledge into his life; hence his sense of disappointment grew.

"A favor? This is a pleasure, truly," she said, her glance stealing to his from under the cover of her lids. "All through the months of our perilous travels I looked to see some response to the friendship which I offered. Thou wouldst not have me wholly solicitous and turn the beggar thou used formerly to be? Thou art too gallant to tax my poor heart so much. Under the eyes of the good Paul we might be as children, knowing no evil, but now we can remember how much we have been to each other. It is well enough, like our beautiful Nero, to love poetry, or, like the Christian Paul, to dream of a heaven beyond the clouds; but we lose nothing by a foretaste on earth. If Paul thinks so he is mistaken; if he insists so, why, then, I stand by my

words and keep my philosophy as a woman; thou wilt surely find it to thy disposition as a man. I can be frank with thee, my Fabyan; I have heard all the news at court, but I would not do myself the injustice to believe that thou couldst wholly forget me. I told thee as much at Cæsarea. What is the favor thou wouldst ask? I have been gracious in the past; thou wilt not find me less generous now."

She forgot her treatment of him in the days to which she referred; but she saw the curious look that stole into his eyes and then the consternation which they expressed. She watched him coyly, her own orbs changing in both expression and light as she caught a glimmer of the truth; but the long lashes concealed her emotion. He moved uneasily, and then recalled the crisis with which the Amici had soon to deal—Berenice would not be obdurate; she was a woman, and could pity.

He reasoned like a lover and a man—like a lover in distress and a man beset by trial. She could pity him, but never the one who might make him blind to her advances.

She sighed softly, drawing the filmy material which enveloped her warm person over the fair flesh of her arm, her jewelled hand upon the velvet within easy reach of his; he had taken it at Cæsarea, as he remembered with remorse. What had happened to him since? Had he loved Myrrha the less—and did he love her more since he had come to study new doctrines under a strange Jew? And what had these to do with love, or Myrrha, the woman before him, or the heart that beat within him? Every movement of Berenice was an invitation, extended graciously and offered to a memory which he would be an Egyptian anchorite to forget. His mind filled now with Myrrha, he thought of it with bitterness, the sense of remorse growing stronger. How truly Paul had said that "our sins will

find us out." And Fabyan thought further that his offence had been a common one, and not an offence at all as judged by the morals of Rome. He had erred in nothing but servility to the woman before him, and this error had brought its own punishment. Why, now, was it to arise and confront him at this critical moment, when the present demanded all his powers? He thought of it grimly as Berenice spoke again.

"Come, my Fabyan," she continued, the smile of confidence yet upon her lips. "Am I not understood? Be gentle with me, as of old, though thou hast now grown severe as a soldier. I have waited for this moment since the hour at Cæsarea when from the peristyle we looked together towards the blue sea."

He hesitated still, and then spoke, desperately:

"I will save thee any speech, my Berenice, if thou wilt aid me to save my poor life and the lives of others whom I love."

"Thy life—others? Art in peril?"

She looked at him with wonder, and, noting the change in her eyes, he continued:

"When I have said my life, in truth, I fear for more. I base my plea upon my faith in thee, and that friendship which is recent, rather than aught that hath been before—that friendship, sweet to be recalled, which grew under the communion with our Paul, whose teachings have gone to both our hearts and made them purer. I have loved thee, and love thee now—love thee as a man may love a woman whom he would defend to his death —with a love from which all guilty fervor is lost in a better fancy which gives to thee both dignity and strength."

She lifted her hand with an impatient gesture, the significance of which he failed to note; she essayed to stop him, but he went on earnestly; he was impelled by the intensity of his feelings and his rising faith in her. "I love thee now as one whose friendship is more

to be valued, because it hath grown chaste, and because together we can look to a higher life, where esteem sits in company with truth. I come to thee as a woman who will pity another woman, whom I love; and, because I love her, she and I and all of my house are threatened with the anger of Cæsar. Thou knowest the court and what it can do to those who are not its friends. Thou knowest the Amici, their power and dignity—that power and that dignity which have provoked the enmity of Tigellinus. The household of my uncle is in danger. His foster-daughter, Myrrha, is desired by the charioteer. She is my betrothed. Is not that enough? To be desired by Tigellinus is more than a threat to a woman who is betrothed—it has in it more than the elements of death. As it has come to Myrrha, it is to me a peril beyond words. My efforts to save her may mean the destruction of all who are attached to me. That is why I am here. Help me! Thou art strong with Poppæa, and hence with Cæsar. Be in truth my friend, and, with thy woman's wit, tell me what I am to do?"

He had risen now, earnest and impassioned, and she had risen also. He stepped towards her, but she waved him back, drawing her robes about her and standing by her couch, her face a problem in its anger and surprise. In a moment her expression changed to mockery and scorn, but it retained none the less of fury. He paused at her manner, and then stopped suddenly. Her glance froze all further words upon his lips.

"And this is Fabyan Amici!" she said, regarding him with eyes that measured him slowly from head to foot; "this is the cavalier of the peristyle and rose at Cæsarea—Fabyan, the courtier—who knew me at a time when my smile might buy his fortune, or that thing called by Paul his soul! What a man, and what a day!—a day of revelation for us both—of mutual abasement, too. I foolish enough to forget that I once gave thee cause for anger,

and thou foolish enough to mistake me as a woman. Fools both of us!"

She laughed harshly, while he gazed at her in grieved surprise and with growing indignation.

"The foster-daughter Myrrha—thy betrothed!" she exclaimed, tossing her head in derision, as she laughed again. "The white-faced hand-maiden of old Lucius! Perhaps the daughter of old Lucius, for aught I know, for all men are liars! Thy betrothed! Ha! ha! A little yellow bird that twitters, and knows the value of a man as—as Poppæa remembers the time when she was like her! Help thee! I would have helped thee to plot against the Emperor—I would have helped thee to any wish over the corpse of my best hopes—I would have sold all my future to have thee kiss my hand as in the days thou hast lived to mock—and now thou beggest that I help thee to thy little white-face! And such a mistress! Why, any beardless boy would be for her revelation enough—and thou must waste thyself!" She paused in her rage, and then spoke on. "Enough! Come, sir, we'll speak as man and woman, since the matter hath so shaped itself. Thou wouldst save Lucius and his family—thy Myrrha and the rest—thyself, in the dishonored mass that is frightened at Cæsar? So be it. Come, I know Tigellinus—none better. What wilt thou give if I help thee—nay, if I draw the charioteer from the hunt and save thee?"

He was silent, unequal to the fury of a woman's scorn which had come upon him so suddenly. It was the old Berenice, with the added passion of vanity outraged, grown powerful in her anger; it was the coquette, slighted, now among his enemies. He struggled with the disappointment, rage, and despair that possessed him. His impulse was to reply by taunt, and, angered the more for her words regarding Myrrha, to hurl a defiance at Cæsar, Tigellinus, and all the court. But he remem-

bered that she had been the companion of his journey; with her he had learned to know the faith of Paul. This thought of the Apostle calmed him.

"I scarcely understand thee, my Berenice," he replied, with sadness in his tone. "I have much to forgive myself for having angered thee. Since I find that thou art without pity, I can at least show thee that I am without resentment. Deal with my petition as thou wilt, I am yet thy friend."

These were not words with which to mollify her. With such a woman, at such a time, rage and anger—a tempest to meet her own—would have served him better. She laughed again, the harsher note now gone, but her accents still vibrant with the fury which she had expressed.

"No—the friend of thine uncle's foster-child!" she retorted, scornfully. "The little new one to whom thou art teaching love! What wilt thou give?" she continued; "thou hast not answered me. How much dost thou value this little innocent, whose peeping fancy is as a breath of wind to the storm I offered thee? Come, since I must bargain with thee."

"I will give my life," he replied, his face pale with his suppressed emotion. "Give it cheerfully, and without regret."

"'Tis the answer of a man!" she exclaimed, her scorn growing. "I will swear to have heard it myself a thousand times, perhaps from thee. 'My life,' dost thou say?—why not thy fortune also? 'My fortune and my life' is the formula. Bah! the life, which the gladiator gives on order, the debtor flings away, and which thou, as a soldier, hast offered a hundred times in battle. Truly, this girl hath inspired thee with a passion fit to succeed mine own, since the measure of thy sacrifice is so vast!"

"I admit it," he answered, quietly. "My life is nothing to save her and those she loves; but it is all I have."

"What, sir!" she cried, fiercely, looking at him with eyes in which gleamed all the fury of the sands which had warmed her birth. "After thy confession of to-day thou mightst do better. Wilt give thine honor — thy faith—thy soul? Is that too much for a woman if thou lovest her?"

He looked at her fixedly, seeing now the strength of the rage he had inspired.

"Remember what this may mean to thee and to her," continued Berenice, her face still flaming. "She may come to the palace—Cæsar hath no gentle way, and Tigellinus—ha! ha! She is to be pitied, surely, if he brings her here, not for love of her but for hate of thee. Let her first have Cæsar's eye—and then the charioteer! Wilt have her tossed about the court before she is tossed to the lions? I might suggest it. Come, wilt give thine honor?"

He flushed and then paled. Her words opened to him, as to one who looked down a widening corridor, a vision of what might come to Myrrha through the hatred which Tigellinus might hold for him. He was ignorant of the feelings of the Emperor's favorite beyond what Brabano had suggested to him, and was as one groping in the dark. The fury of the woman before him frightened him—not for himself, but for his betrothed. Had he been alone he would have laughed at all danger, and have gone with a smile to any fate; but he trembled in the presence of a peril, its width unknown, which threatened the others whom he loved. His perplexity heightened the danger and exaggerated the position in which he found himself. In behalf of Myrrha he would grasp at any straw, and to save her there was no sacrifice which he would not make.

"I will give all," he replied, huskily. "If thou canst aid her—my Myrrha—I will give to the uttermost, my

fortune, my life, and my honor. Whom wouldst thou have me betray?"

"Whom!" she cried, her eyes blazing and her voice rising in malignity. "There, again, is the man. Whom! Whom! Whom but the girl herself—thy beloved Myrrha, the white-face? Wilt betray her to *me?* Wilt put her aside for some softer youth, whom she will find more fitting to her silly ways, while thou—with the soldier that hath risen in thee, and the new strength which I noted jealously in our journey from Cæsarea—makest amends to my beauty? I can save thee, her, thine uncle, and his household. My woman's wit shall be potent if thou wilt bargain with me. How is it?"

His anger rose to his throat and choked him. He forgot Paul, his teachings, and the influence of the doctrines of meekness and humility. He looked at her with a fury as great as her own, and stepped forward with a movement that, despite her rage, for an instant stopped her breath. Men could be goaded to desperation, and something in his eyes frightened her. Then he recovered slowly, gaspingly, as one who sets his muscles after a struggle to the death. He had been tempted, but was now resolved; he had touched the verge of madness in his rage because he *had* been tempted.

"No," he answered, calmly. "I will give nothing. I will rely henceforth upon the resources within myself and that strength which cometh from on high, mightier than the powers of all the earth. I thought to touch thee with the name of Paul, and marvel to find how much I have mistaken thee. Once before I lost thee, and was grieved, but now I fear that thou hast lost thyself, and I grieve indeed. May peace be with thee!"

The fire still lingered in her eyes, but as she regarded him her thoughts were busy. She was thinking of the girl who had won him—this man, now cold and severe, whom she had known as a blast from a furnace in the

days of his revelry. Then she laughed, sinking back upon her cushions with her old grace, again languorous and subtile.

"Go," she said, as she touched a bell which brought her maid to the chamber. "Good hours to thee, my Fabyan. The soldier is poor, indeed, who hath nothing to sell at court."

He bowed to her sternly and departed, followed by the echoes of her mocking laughter which came through the drawn curtains.

XV

THE COURT OF NERO

UPON the morning following the interview between Brabano, Paul, and Fabyan, and the fateful scene between the latter and Berenice, Nero sat in state in the throne-room of the Palatine. These occasions had grown rare of late, but when the young Emperor saw fit to assume the diadem and purple, and sit in the grandeur of his office, it was made a ceremony of surpassing splendor. Soldiers massed along the avenues approaching the Palatine, and the prætorian guard surrounded the palace. The senate attended in robes of state, and their wives and families, with long trains of slaves, accompanied them in litters and chariots. The vicinity of the court glistened with breast-plate, helmet, and plume, and from foot to top of the approaching stairways of marble on either side, and among the fluted columns of the porticos, the sunlight reflected the sheen of spears. Governors of the near-by provinces came with their retinues, and the tribunes, in golden armor, and bearing their batons of office topped by the eagles of Rome, preceded the Germans as an Imperial guard. Bells were rung and gongs beaten throughout the city, and the temples of Minerva, Venus, and Vesta were decorated. Garlands and streamers flew from lofty staffs high above the Circus Maximus, the whole city came forth in gala dress, and until the noon hour, the moment of Cæsar's sitting, the shops were closed and business ceased.

The appearance of the Apostle before the throne in this effulgent pageant was an obscure incident to its regal happening — for him, perhaps, a most fortunate circumstance. The ceremony was to proclaim a new office for the victorious Galba, who had lately triumphed with the army in the North, and to announce the will of Cæsar as to the official attendance at the coming Feast of Neptune.

The chamber which was the scene of this august spectacle was a vast, octagonal apartment occupying the entire wing of the palace between the Imperial gardens. The throne itself sat high upon a marble platform, approached by circular steps, under a vast canopy of purple supported by golden rods. The mosaic floor was a mass of color in every design of leaf and bud, interrupted at intervals by rugs and tapestries, which were thrown about the platform to the right and left.

Nero was in his twenty-sixth year. His stature was graceful but attenuated by indulgence, and the flesh, of an unhealthy hue, hung loosely upon his arms and legs. His head was large, his features prominent, and his eyes small, under a protruding brow. Nothing within his countenance revealed the immeasurable corruption of his mind, and, while his smile was frank and engaging, his lips were thin and cruel, and at times, in rage, they parted to disclose the ratlike character of his teeth. He was master of dissimulation, despite the power which made it unnecessary, and his vanity was boundless; the slightest lapse of conduct which failed in Imperial deference meant immediate hatred and ultimate death.

His person upon his Imperial seat was a mass of gems, and blazed until it dazzled the eye, while Poppæa, scarcely less resplendent, sat beside him in robes so crusted with gold as to impede the grace of her wanton form.

It was upon such occasions that Tigellinus shone at

his best, and Nero took in him a great personal pride. The prefect, with his body of a gladiator and the pliant muscles of a chariot racer, in which calling he had first won the favor of his Imperial patron, was a master of detail and arrangement. It was he who set the guards in order and laid out the course of the pageant, and now, in a jewelled corselet and a helmet of pure gold, he stood at the right of his master, surveying the gorgeous assemblage with an eager and exultant eye. Behind the Imperial couple had gathered the ladies-in-waiting upon Poppæa, and near were Berenice, Faustina (the latest love of Tigellinus), Paulina (the wife of Seneca), Fulvia, with Myrrha and Valentina, and hundreds of others of similar station and rank.

The blare of a trumpet brought the concourse to attention, and Scaveas, stepping forward, proclaimed order. Nero's eye had lost its fire, and, already wearied, he sat back dully upon his throne, impatient for the banquet of the evening. Galba was soon invested with the insignia of his triumph, and bowed his head to receive the commendation of his chief. Nero aroused himself when proclamation was made of the games. It was a subject that thrilled each ear. Tigellinus, advancing, made the announcements, his clear voice ringing through the wide chamber as he detailed the order of the festivities. Imperial Cæsar had spared nothing for the pleasure of his populace. All ferocious beasts of which Asia or Nubia could boast lay in their dens under the benches of the arena. Skilled directors would fashion them in proper complements, and the successive spectacles should see man battle with man, or man and beast, or beast and beast tear and rend each other. Wolves, with torches tied to their tails, should be set loose amid tigers wrapped in straw and strewn with oil; criminals should be shot from catapults, and their bodies thrown high above the banners of the arena; and Arabian archers

were to shoot full of arrows some false vestals from the temple at Epirus. But better yet, five thousand criminals had been reserved for sacrifice, and to these others would be added. They were not men alone; there were women and children, the latter the vile offspring of a new breed that worshipped false gods, their parents teaching arts to destroy the public health and means to evilly charm those whom they hated. They were Jews, who scoffed at the nobility of Rome, and followed one Christus, a former rebel of Judæa; they were incendiaries, designing to burn the city. All such should themselves be burned, their bodies made for torches, by which the beasts might have light to devour such as should be thrown to feed them.

The speaker's eye glowed with the frenzy that inspired him as he told of the carnival which Cæsar had prepared, and his hand was often raised in warning to check the cheers which burst forth to interrupt his words. Fabyan turned his glance in the direction of Myrrha, and saw her face pale under the fierce recital, and Fulvia, who was familiar with the sights of the amphitheatre, and Valentina, who held the common sentiment of the Roman maid regarding them, were now grave and thoughtful. But Valentina found a comfort in the glories of the day beyond the rich efforts of Tigellinus and his speech; Fabyan saw beyond the throng the straight heron feather which marked the crest of Ethelred, and noted that her eyes were turned in that direction with many a happy smile.

A prisoner was now led forward. He was a patrician and an officer who had rebelled with a detachment of his men, in Galicia, and slain his superior in command. Upon his trial he was condemned to death, but had appealed to Cæsar. His was a wisdom based upon a knowledge that had been potent in all countries, for his father was a senator, and he had been in his youth

a page to Claudius. His sister was Faustina, and Tigellinus had interfered to save him. The appearance had been arranged with especial view to effect upon the audience, for the condonation of an offence so great might tend to bring scandal upon even Cæsar. The man was weighted with golden chains. He was dressed in a black tunic, and a wreath of white flowers was curled about his neck and hung, trailing, to his feet. He had been instructed to march before the throne and bow in supplication to Poppæa, and as he knelt Nero arose and, standing, addressed him.

He spoke well, as the result of years of training, for speech was his especial pride. He set forth the enormity of the crime, the order of the army, and the discipline which attached to the legions in Roman tradition; but he spoke also of the various acts of valor which were to the prisoner's credit, and then recited in a modulated voice a poem which he had written upon mercy. When he had finished he pronounced the pardon of the culprit, and two of the attending guards struck off his chains. Poppæa led with a signal of pleasure, and the applause for Cæsar's verse was deafening, as the man, now released, stalked to his friends in the assemblage.

As Nero resumed his seat, the centurion Julius, attended by a body of the guard, entered a doorway on the left and presented Paul before the throne. The limbs of the Apostle were unfettered, and his appearance had been made without especial preparation. He carried himself with his accustomed calmness, although his eyes displayed a gleam of interest as they involved the splendor of the pageant. He looked to where Nero sat high in his golden chair, and thought of another spectacle, beside which the pomp and grandeur of this was as the mocking tinsel which in truth embellished it. Upon a loftier eminence he saw another throne, a throne of wood, and the attending soldiers stood about

it; it had not this marble horizon, with its Grecian line of clouds, but its background was the blue of the sky, and the women at its foot were weeping. It held no gilded Cæsar, weighted with precious gems, but the naked figure of a king, indeed, was outlined on a cross.

He closed his eyes, as the great pageant always in his mind took substance there, and crossed his brave arms upon his breast.

Nero looked down in surprise at the group, and slowly drew a jewel to his eye.

"What is this?" he asked.

"A prisoner from Judea, divine one," said Tigellinus. "He was condemned by Festus, and hath appealed to Rome."

Brabano, who had stood in the rear of the throne, stepped now into view.

"He was not condemned, beloved Emperor, but appealed because he was a Roman. He hath been a soldier."

"What is his offence?" asked Nero of the centurion.

"Sedition," replied the soldier. "He quarrelled with his compatriots of the Jewish temple."

"Let him be pardoned," said Nero, wearily, turning a pleasant eye upon the physician. "Is it not so, Tigellinus?"

The favorite hesitated. He looked at the humble but convincing figure of the Apostle, and his treacherous nature struggled against his promise to Brabano.

"He is a follower of Christus, great one. Thou hast heard of this sect—the incendiaries."

"Why, then," cried Nero, impatiently, "take him away for the lions. This shall be the judgment unless our good Brabano wishes otherwise."

Fabyan lifted his hand.

"What is this?" said Nero, a suggestion of anger in his voice. "Oh, I see," and he pressed his finger to

his lips and lowered his head in thought. "This is the man who travelled in the company of the sister of the Jewish King—our Berenice."

"He should be spared, methinks," said Tigellinus, still halting, "but—thou art wearied. We have a feast to-night, and this man may come before thee. Perhaps we shall hear him with interest; it may be sport to learn of these Christians."

"Nay," said Nero, smiling as he arose. "We have other matters for the feast. Let the man begone."

He waved his sceptre, and the great concourse rolled away. It melted through the doors, which the slaves threw open on the sides, like the receding waves upon a beach, and as it vanished into the gardens Nero gave his hand to Poppæa and assisted her to descend the steps of the platform.

Fabyan, with Brabano, hastened to the anteroom, where Julius had taken Paul, prior to releasing him, in accordance with the judgment of Nero. Both desired to congratulate him upon his escape. Fabyan feared yet some plot or scheme upon the part of Tigellinus, and Brabano wished to arrange for another meeting.

The Apostle greeted them both with pleasure, but was apparently unmoved by the experiences of the day. As he had said to Fabyan, his long imprisonment by Felix, subsequent arraignment before Festus, together with the many other incidents of adventure which had attended his career, made an appearance before even so formidable a tribunal as that of the Cæsar but an additional chapter in his eventful life. He readily agreed to meet Brabano again, telling him the location of his shop in the Subura, and promising to attend at the palace when a messenger should come to summon him. Brabano also expressed a wish to meet Peter, but at this the Apostle hesitated. He was fearless upon his own account, but he would not put in any jeopardy his ven-

erable associate. From his place of waiting in the custody of the centurion he had heard the jubilant announcement of the prefect, and knew the fate in store for many of his brethren. Like himself, Peter was in God's hands, but Paul knew that duty enjoined upon him wisdom, and that the great disciple, no less than himself, must remain in the flesh so long as either had breath to speak the message with which the Master had intrusted them. Brabano noted his hesitation and did not press his request, but Paul finally said that, following their next meeting, if Peter so desired, he and the physician might meet; but the disciple would probably not come to the palace. The meeting would occur at some gathering of the Christians at which Brabano could be present, provided he came unattended by any of the soldiers of the court.

The physician expressed his assent to this arrangement, and, bidding the Apostle adieu, requested Fabyan to come with him to his apartments, to remain until the banquet of the evening.

Fabyan was eager to see Myrrha. Not a moment had been vouchsafed him in which to press her hand or look into her eyes since she had, with such delicious and ravishing simplicity, confessed her love for him. He had gone to his uncle's house upon the night before, immediately after he had left the chamber of Berenice in the palace, but Lucius, with Fulvia and the girls, accompanied by Volgus and the young Briton, had departed. The soldier had waited for them until nearly midnight, but they had not returned. He would have gone again in the early morning, but it was his duty to prepare for the functions of the day at the court, and he had to content himself with the glimpse he saw of her face as she stood in the throng behind the Empress. He would have gone now to her side but for those about her, and the embarrassment his presence might make for her, because

of his ardor, his inability, strangely new, to repress his feelings, and because of the fact that she would be, with Valentina, in preparation herself for the banquet of the night, at which Lucius and his family must attend.

Paul could have told him, had he but spoken, where his uncle and his beloved were upon the evening before, but Fabyan had no thought that Lucius would have sought, upon his own account, or, indeed, at the request of any, a meeting of those Christians whom so late it had been his duty to persecute. But the words of the Apostle had gone deep in the old man's breast, and Fulvia, already apprised by rumor, by the mutterings of her slaves, by word gathered from Zekiah and the various tradesmen that frequented the house to supply its needs, and later from the young Briton, of that gospel which taught forgiveness, charity, love, and those sentiments so much in harmony with a good woman's nature, had pressed upon her husband a closer knowledge of the creed of hope—the gospel that saved—and he had yielded to her entreaty to seek it further. Myrrha would have waited for the coming of Fabyan, of which she was certain, but Valentina was all impatience; she was eager for the adventure, and Ethelred, with Volgus, was to guide them. Myrrha knew that Fabyan had had as yet no opportunity to inform his uncle of their happiness, and she herself would not make a confidant of any in the secret that sat with such delight upon her heart, and so she went with them in silence.

The night of the feast surpassed the splendor of the day. The palace of Nero was upon the northeastern portion of the Palatine, its broad front looking upon the Sacra Via. To the rear were the wide gardens, so accurately designed that they descended an almost imperceptible slope, terminating at a magnificent temple reared to the offices of Apollo. Brabano's chambers were in the southern and western wing, fronting upon

the gardens to the east and to the rear, overlooking a steep wall which abutted upon a street called Bonaventura; they constituted a separate structure which Nero had recently erected for the physician's especial benefit, and from the upper windows, above the surrounding foliage, could be seen the bronze eagles above the walls of the Circus Maximus in the valley below, while to the southwest there was a view of the distant Tiber.

Fabyan stood at a window of these apartments, a prey to his perplexed thoughts, and, as night fell upon the soft leafage of the garden, the city, the majestic walls and pinnacles about him, saw the lines of lights spring like fire-flies along the white walks. Scented torches encircled the hundred fountains and were festooned above the streams that flowed between, and then great fires, fed with oil, were lighted upon the tops of towers erected at the various entrances to the park. These were attended by slaves, who constantly drew the combustibles with ropes to the platforms above, and the great glare which radiated from them lighted the approaching avenues and surroundings as though by day. Chariots and litters were massed in the smaller of the surrounding thoroughfares, where gossiping or quarrelling slaves were mingled in a seemingly confused throng, but troops of soldiers assigned them places, and looked upon them with watchful care, that the peace of the Imperial epicure should not be disturbed. The guests were a multitude; the choicest of the patrician citizens now came to partake of the Imperial hospitality. Tables were spread throughout the great chambers of the palace and along its wide corridors, and others, for those of lesser degree and rank, under the trees of the garden.

Nero himself banqueted in the principal hall, where the central board was raised upon a marble pyramid, its top a broad surface of dazzling white. Its lower steps were cushioned as seats to the surrounding boards, the whole

banked with masses of flowers. Couches upon which the guests reclined made ample provision for luxurious ease while dining, and every wine known to the cunning of those who pressed the grape was mingled with viands of fish, flesh, fruit, sweet, nut, and moulded cake, steaming from the ovens of the kitchens below, or banked in great golden basins of snow brought from the tops of the Apennine Mountains.

At these feasts Lucius had formerly a seat at Nero's table, with Seneca, Scaveas, Lucan, Palleas, and the elders of the senate. The women of the court were given a separate board immediately fronting Nero's seat, upon which jugglers, dancing girls, and sometimes wrestlers appeared. But now Tigellinus had arranged it differently. Poppæa and her women sat upon Nero's right, while the prætor, with his friends, occupied the left; Lucan remained because of his taste as a poet, and Fabyan because he was the most youthful of the tribunes; but the elders and senators now sat with their families at the neighboring boards, a plan which pleased them greatly, as they were thus placed beyond the caprice or censure of the Imperial glance. Nero was near-sighted, particularly at night, and constantly used a jewel to magnify distant objects, but at the feasts, and beyond the second cup of Falernian, wrapped in the ecstacy of his own verses, he seldom saw beyond the women or the dancers, and his guests thereafter feasted in peace.

Brabano had now a seat near his royal master to the left, and nearly opposite to Poppæa. He had placed Fabyan beside him, where they might converse together. The latter was filled with consternation upon entering the chamber, to find that Myrrha had been separated from Lucius and his family at the table of the senators and placed near the person of the Empress. He was at a loss to account for this, and knew not to whom he

should ascribe it. The stately beauty of Berenice obscured her somewhat from the Imperial eye, but Fabyan, in the rapt appreciation of a lover, felt that should Nero now behold her in her increased and developed beauty the danger in which she stood, because of the favorite, would be augmented by the infatuation of his master. He had thought to withdraw from the board when the drinking became general, and had obtained from Brabano a promise of assistance. When the banquet had reached that stage where decorum was abandoned—when the toasts to Bacchus and to Venus were drunk by men standing above the women half disrobed, who reclined upon the flowers of the tables, while wine was poured upon their heated bosoms, and drunk from their flesh in amorous laughter to the music of songs that made even the elder matrons blush—at such a time he would steal to Myrrha's side and lead her from the hall, bidding Valentina and the Briton follow. None might leave the chamber until Nero arose, under the dread of his high displeasure, but the guards could be bribed at such a moment. Fabyan had ventured it before. After Nero had recited his verses and gone with Tigellinus into that state that made his jewel useless, he had slipped away without apparent notice or any subsequent rebuke. Now, should they be observed, Lucius might explain that they were taken suddenly ill, and Brabano could ascribe it to an excess of wine; this, if it were done in the physician's manner and with his proper humor, would be the subject of jest instead of anger, and Myrrha would be spared the shame which she always felt at these ribald feasts, which had grown more wanton as Nero had grown older.

As the banquet proceeded the young tribune grew more impatient. He strove to catch the eye of his beloved, but those who intervened at the angle of the table prevented. He could only see the sheen of her

alabaster flesh and, at intervals, the lustre of her hair. His head rang with the mirth about him. He was scarcely conscious of what he ate, and Brabano, trying in vain to enlist his interest, abandoned the attempt and gave his attention to the music. Nero arose and spoke, and sat amid the shrieks of assumed delight, and, rising again, stood until the prolonged cheers died away.

Fabyan's anger and perplexity increased. He heard nothing of Nero's poem, although he joined mechanically in the applause which followed; then his brain reeled as the youthful despot turned from his seat and bent his head over the form of Myrrha.

The excited fancy of the tribune had misled him, for Nero, unsteady upon his feet, had leaned forward to caress Poppæa; but, frenzied with alarm, Fabyan had started erect, and, lifting his cup on high, had uttered an exclamation which brought the board to an amazed silence. He felt the strong and restraining touch of Brabano's hand upon his shoulder, but its warning was too late.

"Hail, Cæsar!" he cried, his goblet upraised and his wit returning. "May a soldier without defeat in battle admit himself vanquished by the august verses of his august master? Will Cæsar forgive a victim for whom he is himself responsible?"

"Surely, my Fabyan!" answered Nero, recognizing the tribune, a smile of gratified vanity replacing the annoyance upon his face. "'Tis a pleasant suit, or else ill-timed. State it."

"'Tis the time of times, immortal Nero! 'Tis a suit of love, warmed by thy genius, and urged to confession under thy glorious song!"

"Stand all!" cried Nero, lifting his goblet as the banquet arose at his bidding. "By the Greek god, Pan! our Fabyan is himself a poet, and since my verse hath

touched him to acknowledgment of love ye shall pledge him in Cæsar's consent. Drink!"

Lucius, with Fulvia and Valentina, had looked on in wonder, thinking their kinsman drunken, but joining in the cheer which followed Nero's words. The company thought it a part of the feast's arrangement, and cheered again as Nero spoke.

"The bride! We drink to the bride, my tribune! Her name?"

Fabyan bent his head slowly, his hand upon his breast. He knew how fierce the consternation he must have driven home to those of his heart, so unprepared for such a scene, but his resource, his wit, and his experience as a courtier came to him.

"Divine Cæsar," he replied, "she sits near the heavenly Poppæa, and is in part under thy gracious favor. She is the daughter of Miriam and the adopted daughter of my kinsman, Lucius. If she hath favor in thine eyes, I am as fortunate at court as in the field."

Myrrha drew slowly back, with pale face and parted lips. She marvelled at the ordeal which Fabyan had prepared for her, and fancied almost, as did those of her family, that her lover had lost his mind in drink. She did not understand his desperate strait, but she saw that, while laboring under some stress of mind, his eye and countenance were clear; but her confidence was, as her love, supreme, and she nerved herself to face the moment with a demeanor unflinching.

"All beauty hath favor in my sight," said Nero, answering Fabyan's speech, and drawing his jewel to his eye. He surveyed her calmly, with no flush upon his face.

"The gods be gracious; perhaps thou hast won—or lost," whispered Brabano.

"Come, sweet Myrrha," said Nero, extending his hand and taking that of the girl. "Fair, indeed, my Fabyan,

and blessed art thou in thy choice. Under Cæsar's especial favor sit thou together, and when we have drunk another cup we will excuse thee, to whisper to each other in some secluded spot the story of thy love."

He laughed as he led Myrrha to a place at Fabyan's side, and returned to his own by Poppæa. As the lover, with exultant heart, grasped Myrrha's hand and sank with her upon the cushions, he saw the surprise fade from the eyes of Lucius and Fulvia and a glad light settle there, while they waved to him with joyous gestures.

But, even as the cup of joy was at his lips, Fabyan went pale as he caught the malignant gleam in the eyes of Berenice. She whispered to Tigellinus. In an instant the prefect was on his feet.

"I suffer no one," he said, standing erect, "to surpass me in love of Cæsar, or any exaltation in his presence. All of his words go to my heart and remain there. He knoweth this, and hence I have his gracious favor. Surely, a lover inspired to public statement of his passion, winning thereby his sovereign's sanction of his nuptials, is moved as deeply, and oweth something in return. Our tribune cannot have forgotten great Cæsar's song, and a fit return of the royal favor would be a copy of it sent to us to-morrow."

"'Tis so, indeed!" cried Nero, his eyes lighting. "I saw the passion which my song inspired, and warrant our Fabyan hath it as well as thou. I will have a copy of the tribune on the morrow."

Tigellinus bent upon Fabyan a look that was eloquent of malice.

"We will send an early messenger to thee, tribune," he said.

Again his eyes flashed, and a pang went to the stout heart of the soldier. He looked into the shining face beside him, a wrath the more bitter because impotent

welling through his veins. He looked also at the triumphant face of Berenice, and knew the ingenuity that had prompted Tigellinus to speak. The princess of the house of Herod Agrippa did not quail under his glance of anger and reproach; her eyes responded to the gleam in his, resting also upon the face beside him. Fabyan understood the force of the covert shaft that had been fired—almost as a shaft, in fact, to quiver in his heart—and his fingers clinched as over the handle of his sword as he heard the murmur of Brabano:

"'Tis as I suspected. Thou hast lost!"

XVI

BESIDE THE FOUNTAIN

FABYAN and Myrrha availed themselves of the permission which Cæsar had given them, and when the feast grew riotous hastened away together. The barb which the speech of Tigellinus had set in Fabyan's breast yet rankled there, but above his anger and chagrin, and above his fear—above the apprehension he felt for the future of Myrrha—was the fact of her presence beside him. To-night he had declared his love for her before the world; she had responded without embarrassment, and with a courage that sent his soul to heaven. Her hand rested upon his arm as they left the banquet-hall, and its magic touch was potent to thrill as in that supreme moment when she had first laid it in his. He thought of Berenice, taunting, furious, scornful, deep with the sophistry of all her life, and mocking the tender passion he had won. Her words burned like those of Tigellinus. Who knew better the emotions of the human heart, or had so tested them under every circumstance of color, fault, or virtue? Had she spoken truly? Would *any* youth have found an answer in Myrrha's heart? Had he won her love because he had spoken for it first? He knew of her life of innocence and how few were her opportunities for choice in such a matter. What feelings beset a young girl's solitude and shaped the heroes of her fancy? What was the depth of the heart near his, and what would she return for the love he had given—his love, and the passion he had rejected in the furious

woman who had scoffed, as weak and puerile, at the emotions of his gentle one? Myrrha, so white and fair and tender, and shrinking almost to fear when compared with the impetuous knowledge of Berenice! His love for her filled his whole being; but what of her love for him?

At such an hour and in her company such thoughts could only come to a man who had known a Berenice; he thought not at all in the days when he had gone to her, forgetful of everything except the intoxication of her presence and the crowning fact that she professed to love him. How madly jealous he could be those who had known of Felix could attest. But in spite of the power with which Berenice had once appealed to him, she never moved him as did the girl whose exalting touch was now upon his arm. What was it?

He was younger than his gravity of demeanor and younger than the dignity he had won; not thirty yet, and he felt even now the fervor of boyhood in his veins. He had likewise a knowledge of conscious strength and a power that had never been called upon, even under the impulse of Berenice's most generous hour. Was it this that the sister of Herod Agrippa saw within him, and had it stirred her to new passion, and hence to anger? He knew not and cared not, except that he might bring a more protecting sense to the lovely creature of his soul. But could she return his love with anything like the intensity with which he gave it? Was his life to be barren in the fact that he loved vainly, and must he eat his heart out with the knowledge that he had won her affection at an early moment and that it could never rise with a majesty to match his own? These were the seeds which the words of Berenice had planted. Had he not appeared in the rôle of a lover, his Myrrha would have found some Paulo to stir the weakness of her heart. His reflections were unworthy of himself and his devotion;

but he remembered Berenice, and had something to be forgiven. Love has its penalties for the violation of its laws, and its decrees are stern and pitiless. What truth lay in the scornful words of Berenice?

While it was thus apparent that Fabyan loved Myrrha —loved her with all the intensity and ardor of a heart that once loved vainly—he had not analyzed his passion nor sought to know its cause. It was sufficient that he loved—that Myrrha was beautiful and that something in her and about her appealed to him with a conscious force. When he had found that she loved him in return, his heart, triumphant, abandoned itself to joy. He had not sought to know the measure of her feeling. Hence the words of Berenice rested upon his spirits like a nightmare. He searched himself, and then looking from his own soul he looked to her. The supreme passion of the heart finds no truth in logic; it is an impulse and not a law. But, notwithstanding, it is so much the chief motive of all humanity—its master instinct—that nature deals with it justly, and when it is pure makes its basis divine. Myrrha was a creature of the natural. She loved beauty, and, beautiful herself, was a thing of love. The sad fortunes of her early days had made her thoughtful and developed within her an unsuspected strength. Bred, as she had been, as a foster-child, she had lived much in herself. Her imagination was quick and her motives pure; her views of life, even from her narrow surroundings, were correct. It was the strong that she admired, as she felt a strength within herself; and while her voice was soft and her manner gentle, she was vigorous in thought. But a woman and, above all, a girl, she loved the beautiful. This added a spirit of poetry and romance to her loveliness and made her companionship enchanting. It was little wonder that Fabyan loved her, but, however deep his affection, he was yet to know how truly he was himself to be envied.

They had passed down the long corridors of the palace, and between the row of guards upon the steps had descended to the gardens. Beyond the lights a path tended towards the cool shadows. The waiting attendants had clustered about the entrances, where the fumes from the great building, with its gayety and movement, stirred them to excitement. The lovers were unheeded. They passed along the walk, which widened between the mass of scented shrubbery until it entered a gravelled circle, in the centre of which was a playing fountain. Gleams of radiance from the burning towers penetrated the foliage of the intervening trees and fell in spots of gold upon the white surface of the walk and the marble of the basin. The water rippled gently about its stone figures, murmuring a music to the night, and under a bower of interlacing vines a seat invited them. The clasp of her hand answered the pressure of his as he drew her to it, and together they sat down.

She sighed, and then laughed softly, both sigh and laugh expressive of relief.

"Art thou weary?" he inquired, fondly. His tone had that anxiety which a maid discovers always in the voice of the man who loves her.

"Ay, I am wearied," she responded, turning her face to his. "The crowd, the feast, and the happenings of to-night frightened me."

He could see her countenance but faintly, yet the impulse was not to be denied; he bent over and kissed her, every thought except of her delicious presence vanishing into the shades about them.

"I am forgiven?"

She sighed, and laughed again. Her faith, born of her happiness, met his caress frankly. That maidenly reserve which lingers as a protecting shield about the modesty of girlhood had nothing to fear from him. They had spoken for each other before all the dignitaries

of Rome. No betrothal could henceforth be more sacred nor any other tie more binding. He was hers by his own confession, proudly proclaimed, and she was his because she had acknowledged him with her whole soul. Both were a flutter of tender thoughts. The beating of their hearts answered the music of the fountain and responded to the murmurs of the night. She was stirred by an emotion different from his; she was only conscious of her happiness in the fact that she was loved—in the thought that the Fabyan whom she had adored with reverential eyes, almost as far back as she could remember, had melted into tenderness—that her presence set him trembling, and softened the lines of his handsome face until it glowed with joy. He was happy, too, but his conscious rapture spoke for himself, and not for her, within himself.

For a time they sat in silence, and then she spoke.

"What was the meaning of the scene to-night, my Fabyan? It was not a test of me. Something lies beneath it?"

"Yes," he replied.

"Tell me?" she urged.

"Thou hast courage—thou art brave?"

She shook her head.

"I know nothing of courage," she answered. "I only know that I love thee. There is nothing that thou art, that thou thinkest, or that could come to thee of which I would not hear. If thou shouldst die, and the knowledge would bring death to me, yet I would hear of it gladly rather than not hear of thee at all."

He kissed her again, and then spoke, telling her, and concealing nothing—his fear of Cæsar, their danger, and his eager rage.

"Oh, my Myrrha!" he cried, passionately, when he had finished. "What other woman would have so nobly

borne it—so met my passion and its despair! How little am I worthy of thee!"

"Nay," she responded, "thou art more than worthy. Love knows no fear and no reproach. I know not how I know it, but 'tis true. I shall never blush for thee except in pride."

Her words stifled him, and those of Berenice fell away like the memory of an evil dream.

"Yesterday is blotted out," he said. "My life begins to-night."

She laughed happily, nestling closer to him upon the seat. He felt the dew upon her hair as it brushed his cheek.

"I have all confidence in thee," she said, "hence I cannot bring myself to a fear of Cæsar. I knew Tigellinus when he was kind. Thou art great enough in Rome—great because thou hast given naught but service to thy country. Fate is the friend of those who love truly. Trust me, all will be well with us."

"The court is envious," he replied, "and because of thee I have offended Berenice. We both must shun her now. Thou wilt remember the command laid upon me as I left the banquet-hall—the officer who came to me to remind me of the words Tigellinus had spoken?"

"What words?" she asked.

"Thou hast not forgotten—the words of Cæsar and of Tigellinus?"

She shook her head again. It was a pretty movement in the night, and he recalled it with tenderness as one belonging to her.

"Nay," she answered. "It was little that I heard after thou hadst spoken. What said Tigellinus?"

She felt his concern, and, as he remained silent, she continued:

"In truth, I may be pardoned for remembering little.

Thou canst recall how much I was the centre of all eyes. Would not my thoughts go naturally astray?"

She laughed; her tone expressed no reproach, but his conscience smote him. His fears, with the thought of the morrow came back to him.

"Think of the praise I gave to Cæsar's poem," he said, "and how he answered it. Tigellinus permits no flatterers for Cæsar who flatter well. I am commanded to send to the palace a copy of this poem on the morrow. This is the test to which my words are put, and the end looks dark. I can recollect no line of Cæsar's rhapsody. What excuse will avail me?"

He spoke to prepare her for the truth, because upon the day to follow she must know. His manner was depressed as his fears rekindled. She knew of Cæsar's vanity and understood him.

"I remember the words of Tigellinus now," she answered, soberly. "The import of his speech I did not know. It was a fault; but, in the confusion, which I concealed, and the happiness which followed, I had forgotten."

But she laughed, and he started as though shocked, until he felt the pressure of her hand within his.

"Nay, beloved, start not," she said. "Did I not say to thee that fate was the friend of lovers? I sat near Cæsar, as thou knowest, and before thy speech I was tranquil and at peace. Dost recall that Cæsar's poem was of love? Ah, dear one, my own heart was full of it! The word hath come to me with a new meaning, and I have breathed it with the morning air and dreamed of it at night. The verses of Cæsar likened Apollo to the sun, whose rays kissed the surface of a lake of silver as the lips of the god pressed those of the rose-maid of Themes. How could I help but listen? Thou wert Apollo to my awakened soul, and the warmth of thy first kiss hath never left my lips. Thou shalt send the

verses to Cæsar on the morrow. I can repeat them for thee and miss no word."

He listened to her as one in the transports of a vision, the import of her statement making him gasp for breath. He seized her hand again and brought it to his lips, holding it there with a gentle force that made her bosom heave. His full heart could answer now the words of the sister of Herod Agrippa. He knew what it was that filled him to the brim with happiness, that made the girl beside him one to be adored—one before whom Berenice, with all her brilliant beauty, was as a discordant note in a burst of melody from a lute. Her love was unselfish and without vanity, and every red drop that entered her warm heart was brave. She had soul with passion; her spirit was radiant with health, as her bright person was radiant with youth. Truth glowed in her mind, as color upon her lips and cheeks, and gave to the depths of her eyes that something for which only heaven has a word. Berenice, with all her sinister strength, would break under any test of womanhood from which Myrrha would emerge triumphant. Myrrha's love was high as heaven, deep as the human heart, stronger than death. Paul must be right. There was a life beyond the grave.

They sat long into the night, jubilant in each other. The spot upon which Cæsar was reared in state was not more royal than this triumphant nook over which the rose fell tenderly and near which the fountain murmured.

XVII

AN ORDER TO LUCIUS

PROMPTLY upon the day following, Tigellinus sent his messenger. The cunning prefect knew something of the nature of the man he was beginning to hate, and, prompted by the ingenuity of Berenice, had dealt with it accordingly. He was certain that Fabyan had heard little of the verses of Nero; he had observed his preoccupation at the table, and his nervous efforts to keep Myrrha in view. They had been familiar in the days of Fabyan's laxity, and now he strove to guess how his former friend would meet his thrust, or what excuses he would return. Thinking thus, he smiled at the shrewdness of himself and his fair accomplice in evil anticipation of his triumph. In the beginning, when he had first found favor with Nero, he had learned to fix his wits upon every sentence which his master uttered; as a part of his diplomacy he could repeat it instantly, as though each word were something to be treasured. The youthful tyrant had come to expect it, and Tigellinus knew what it had come to mean to him. It was by such unrivalled flattery that the prefect had gained his present state. This was the inspiration which had stirred his malice against the tribune, and the return of the messenger would be the first blow. A reproach to the vanity of the Emperor was a sting which would go as deep as treason, and this reproach would be found in the lapse of Fabyan's memory.

And Tigellinus had found a new spur to his motive.

The sight of Myrrha upon the previous evening, fresh in her new beauty, had stirred within him his earlier memories. Like the first emotions of Fabyan, his feelings were not subject to analysis; he knew only that he was disturbed. So influenced, and while his eyes dwelt upon her in growing rapture, Fabyan had spoken. This was sufficient to one of the prefect's developed power, and he had listened with an anger as deep as it was, for the present, impotent. Faustina sat near him, and Nero had received the words of the young tribune with favor. But the powerful favorite, jealous now, and nursing his wrath, swore deep behind his heart that his former friend should live to rue that fortunate hour. He was satisfied now with the result of his plan and its prospects; he could see a speedy revenge, which appealed to both his malice and his pride.

Hence his fertile brain felt something of the paralysis of stupor when his messenger returned with the verses correctly written. Word for word they were neatly transcribed, the margin of the parchment gilded; it was lined also with a colored scroll, the tasteful work of some gifted slave of Fabyan's household. The command of the Emperor had been obeyed.

Tigellinus scanned the document closely, his countenance a mixture of fear and superstition. The result smacked of magic, and his brow grew black. He had lost for the moment, but his hatred was intensified. He did not take the verses to Nero, nor destroy them; the Emperor might remember. He put them carefully aside, and, with a darkened brow, bent his steps in the direction of the Imperial apartments.

Nero had just arisen as Tigellinus announced himself. He welcomed his favorite sullenly; his brow was moody and his temper low. Two slaves were bathing him, and two pages stood near with goblets of iced wine. But the Cæsar of to-day was he who had sat in state on yester-

day; the banquet of the night was yet heavy upon his stomach and the fumes of its liquors in his brain. He turned his green eyes upon the radiant countenance of his favorite with something like envy in them, and answered, peevishly, his "Hail and greeting!"

"Drink, my Cæsar!" said Tigellinus, taking the cup from a page and presenting it to the Emperor's lips. "Let the morals of old Seneca and his admonitions as to wine at morning rest in his own sour stomach. Drink! and we shall go for a chariot race in the circus, where I have a new pair of snowy Arabians with hoofs like the fleet breezes about Capreæ. Thou needest the air and the sun and the company of thy loving friend and slave. Come, and I will relate to thee the scandals of yesterday, and we will fix some new plots against those who hate us!"

"By Jupiter!" cried Nero, shaking himself from the hands of his attendants, and standing as he drained the glass, "I swear, thou art like a breath from a new spring morning! I would not part from thee for all the Senecas the regions of Pluto hath spawned. Some day I would like to choke the good man by thrusting the head of his stuttering nephew down his throat; and we may live to do it, my Tigellinus. Didst mark the poem of Lucan, last night, preceding mine? By Bacchus! his heavy measures sickened me. I almost swore to write no more myself, so full of shame they filled me."

"Could we feed them to our new Caligula, the good beast would find no stomach for a Christian," replied Tigellinus, as Nero laughed; "but it is of the Christians I shall speak to thee this morning. The knaves grow dangerous, indeed, since they proselyte among patricians. We shall have a conspiracy soon, with a host of yellow and sneaking devils prowling behind our curtains, like the stabber of the old Caligula, thy predecessor in freedom and greatness. He was your true Emperor—

and they killed him! I would I could have touched thee last night ere thou didst smile upon Fabyan Amici. Only the gods know where thy generous heart will lead thee!"

The face of Nero, which paled instantly, told the favorite that his shaft had gone home. The word conspiracy was of itself enough to drive the blood from the heart of the youthful tyrant; only Tigellinus dared utter it in his presence, and he not lightly. To couple it with reference to the fate of Caligula was to give it an import sufficient to set the Imperial teeth chattering. The words of the favorite had been chosen with a knowledge of this fact, and Nero looked at him with wrathful eyes. He was yet nervous with the wine of the preceding night.

"A fever upon conspirators," he cried, "and upon all who dream of them! What of them, Tigellinus? and what of these Christians? I shall go to no circus until thou hast spoken plainly. By the furies! will I have my days haunted by the thought of poniards behind my curtains and knaves to poison me in the kitchen? I have dreamed of Caligula enough. Speak!"

The eyes of the favorite flashed under a sense of his power; to move Nero thus was to influence him at will.

" 'Tis the knaves—the wretches who rail at thy splendor and are envious of thy talent and greatness!" he cried, simulating the anger of his master. "I have long hated these Amici—the elder sowing dissension in the senate and the younger corrupting the troops. I could name thee fifty whom I have under watch, but treason, now as always, breeds with those we least suspect; hence its danger. No man whose purpose was known ever succeeded in killing a king. 'Tis the villain whom we love that puts the dagger into us—the brother who wants the throne, the father that hath a son under judgment or fears for the fortunes of a daughter—these be the people. Something is the matter with the Amici."

"Yes," murmured Nero, his face still pale. "I fear it."

"Shall we, with our wisdom, make the error of those who have been over-confident and trusted too much? Shall our spirits, wandering in the shades, mutter to each other in the dark, 'What fools we were'?"

"Not I," said his master, now in terror. "Are the Amici traitors?"

"Uncle and nephew, both traitors," answered Tigellinus; "Fulvia a traitress, to counsel treason at night, and the daughters, the breed of traitors, to sing treason to the household in the morning. The Amici have been too strong for loyalty—too powerful not to resent thy greatness and criticise freely thy conduct. There are others of the senate who would follow in their lead, and but await a suggestion to make the treason dangerous. The Amici may speak it any day—will speak it upon the first occasion of anger. When was old Lucius at court to pay homage to his Emperor, and how hath Fabyan Amici held himself aloof? I know more than I can prove and suspect more than I know. Take Lucius into custody and ship him off in banishment, and send the tribune to some duty with orders that will end him. Then we may sleep in peace."

"Nay," said Nero, angrily. "I will not so lightly deal with a situation of danger. Since Lucius hath surrendered his command against these Christians he shall stand as one himself. I shall make new orders against the sect, letting none escape. I have used my power too lightly. I will not banish a patrician who leaves a family behind him to plot for his return; it gives thereby an incentive to the dagger and provides a cause for my death. I will strike surely and at once. Write out the order for arrest, and send a centurion without delay. We will put the Amici in prison. I see a new feature for the games. The lions will make but a slight distinction between a patrician and plebeian, and if we feed them with a senator and tribune it will be a sight

for gods as well as people. Prepare the order, my Tigellinus, before we leave the palace."

"Will it provoke a scandal?" asked Tigellinus, after a moment of hesitation.

Nero's pale cheek flushed.

"Prepare the order," he said. "If any dare to murmur, the gods pity them!"

The wily favorite had not counted upon so much. He was ready enough in his hatred of Fabyan Amici, but he dared not array against himself the active enmity of the patrician class. He was strong with his master, and Nero had power to destroy the Amici, but their summary arrest would provoke a storm in Rome the fury of which Tigellinus feared. He knew that he had spoken falsely; if he stirred Nero to such action the friends of the Amici would bring it home to him, and it would be his heart that the dagger would find. He was courageous enough, and would risk any odds to accomplish his ends, but he preferred to do so by safe methods where such were possible.

"I am quick to obey," he said, finally, in response to Nero's command, "but I am loath to have our morning spoiled by my own spleen. I hate these Amici because they are traitors and will breed mischief, but they have not progressed so far that we need blunt our appetites with haste. They should be destroyed, but we may enjoy the process more if we roll it longer under our tongues. We owe ourselves a certain diplomacy, for these dogs are plenty in the senate, and we may learn too little about them if we warn them too early to shut their mouths. Wait, adorable one! trust thy friend and slave. Let it rest with thy command that I watch the Amici; with the first blush of danger we can send them to the Mamertine, and backed by proof enough to keep the senate silent. Should any murmur then, thou canst strike. It will culminate before the games; I shall see

that it does. Meantime, let us go to the circus and try my Arabians. I am grieved that I brought this cloud to thy brow."

"Thou art ever wise!" exclaimed Nero, who had listened and been convinced as the words of Tigellinus fell upon his ear. "What a counsellor! Having all mine own fury, angered quickly, and yet, when put to the test, thy judgment backed by the cunning of a serpent! Trust Nero for his knowledge of a man, and trust him also for his love of thee!"

The eyes of Tigellinus glowed.

"Nay, noble master!" he cried; "'tis inspiration which I gain from thee. I have the will to strike, and now; but there are Plautus, Affilius, and Secor Diventus, all of the Amici blood, and each a man to run clamoring in the night from friend to friend to tell of a senator slain without proof. Each would take the example to himself, and every sack of wine that came henceforth to our cellars would bear more poison than nutriment. I sought only to put thee on guard, not to urge thee to excess. Let us strike openly, when we can strike all, and at a time when the populace shall be in sympathy. Meantime, as to the Amici, we can proceed by degrees and make our work no less effective. Fabyan loves this Jewish daughter of old Lucius; she hath my fancy, too. Give me an order that she be put in attendance upon Berenice. This will delay his marriage, and may lead him to such open action as to give good cause for his punishment. Later, an order may go for Valentina, and thus we will hook old Lucius. I know these men; that which in the public eye would be an honor for his daughters, to Lucius will mean disgrace. So we will lead him to his ruin."

Nero laughed.

"Take the order," he said, "and prosper according to thy cunning with the girl. It will anger the tribune,

but I shall heed thy counsel otherwise. Now, let us off to the circus."

Tigellinus immediately despatched a slave for a centurion, and hastily prepared the order. Nero sealed it with his signet, and the centurion went upon his errand. The order was addressed to Lucius Amici, directing him either to send or accompany Myrrha to the court, where, until the further pleasure of Cæsar, she would attend upon the Princess Berenice. Tigellinus knew that Lucius was too much a soldier not to give the order instant obedience and return the girl with the officer and his guard. It was customary thus to provide the ladies in attendance at the palace from the daughters of the highest patrician rank, but the selections were usually made by conference with the parents, and the details of their stay and duties arranged for prior to their coming. Only Caligula had seen fit to bring the daughters of his city into his service by summary command, and behind such action was usually the meaning of a despot's motive. Hence, the order at the hand of a centurion following the dead tyrant's example would mark a new epoch in the reign of Nero; it had a distinct menace in its purport, and the favorite knew that the message would carry consternation into the household to which it was directed.

XVIII

FOR HIS HOUSEHOLD

LUCIUS had left his house upon this morning and gone to that of Fabyan upon the Viminalis. Immediately following the despatch of the verses by the messenger of Tigellinus, they had departed in a chariot for the camp of the prætorian guards, at the wall of Servius, beyond the slope of the Esquiline. The prætor in command, Caius Mutius, was a friend to Lucius of many years, and had sent him notice of a review to be given of the visiting guards accompanying the governors of Ostia and Capreæ, who had been present at the Imperial audience of the preceding day.

The Imperial order directed to him was borne by a centurion, who was accompanied by two soldiers and eight slaves, four of whom bore the litter in which Myrrha was to be brought to the Palatine, the four additional being a relay, which always attended upon a carriage from the palace; they also served as a guard, to assist, if necessary, in the enforcement of order, and maintain the dignity of the escort against other litter-bearers in forcing a way through the narrower city streets. They were armed with spears and short swords, and their colors were well known, and usually gained them respect and passage, except in the byways of the Subura and the more lawless thoroughfares along the river. To-day they were watched with both awe and curiosity as they left the Flaminian Way, and, ascending the rocky steps of the Tepolo lane, pressed up the street

upon the slope of Pincius, leading to the dwelling of Lucius.

A slave ran in alarm to announce their coming to Fulvia, and the wife of Lucius met the centurion at the entrance to the portico which looked in upon the vestibule.

"Hail and greeting, noble lady!" said the soldier. "An order from the Emperor to the noble general."

"What!" cried Fulvia, to whom such a visit was full of meaning. "Is it another war? And must Lucius go?"

The centurion indicated by a gesture the silken litter now resting upon the marbles, beside which stood the bearers. "It is an order from Cæsar that the daughter of the general accompany me to court. While to Lucius, it is also to his household; the prefect mentioned its purport when the noble Emperor gave it to my hand."

"Valentina!" cried Fulvia, her voice rising to a shriek of dismay. "The daughter of the general goes to court only in my company. To court, indeed! where I heard such things last night as would make thy camp followers blush. What is it Cæsar means?"

She seized the order which the soldier extended to her and rushed back through the vestibule. Halting in the atrium she called her daughter loudly by name, her voice ringing through the dwelling.

Valentina answered her call. She came from the garden, where she had been in company with Myrrha, Ethelred, and Paulo; these followed her to the presence of her mother, and Volgus, with other familiar servants of the household, came flocking also to the atrium.

"A messenger to seek Lucius! Volgus, send a slave at once in the swiftest chariot—perhaps thou shouldst go thyself. And another slave with all speed to Fabyan. We shall see to what tricks this scurvy charioteer leads the redhead!"

"Peace, mother!" said Valentina, who had taken the

order. "'Tis a call for Myrrha; she is to go to court as a lady in attendance upon Berenice, the sister of the Jewish King. I will accompany her, and my father may come for us upon his return. There is no need for haste."

"Is there not!" cried Fulvia. "Thou knowest nothing, babe. Once at court with these Berenices, these Faustinas, and the foul Nubian women, who are black, and thy father might go for thee in vain. I know of these happenings at the Palatine! Myrrha, my heart's child! Dost think I will let thee depart for such company when sent for with soldiers? Passed through the streets to Cæsar's palace with an armed guard, and thou the child of Lucius! By the gods! this Ahenobarbus knows not the Amici! Send a slave, with a chariot, at once."

"What doth it mean?" asked Ethelred, stepping forward with disturbed countenance.

"Cæsar hath sent for some one here with a guard, and the centurion waits without," said Paulo, weakly. "Fulvia is justly afraid."

"Not afraid, but angry, it seems," replied Ethelred, looking at her with a glance of admiration. "If the redhead of whom she speaks is without, I'll go and chop it off."

"Nay," said Paulo, in a hushed voice, and raising his hand with a quick gesture of fear. "'Tis a name—Ahenobarbus—applied in anger to the great Cæsar by the lower classes. I would I had not heard it here."

"Hell's furies!" cried the Briton, glancing at Fulvia's disturbed features, his eyes flashing. "I'll speak it to the centurion without. What is this?"

"Peace, rash friend!" said Paulo, in terror. "This purports danger, and I will to my father and beg his influence with that of Lucius."

"Thou art excused, Paulo," said Valentina, turning upon him a look of contempt.

"I trust no harm—will come—to thee or thine—or, indeed, any one. Of course, it is madness to resist an order of Cæsar," he stammered, backing towards the vestibule. "Farewell." His face was pale, his demeanor abject, and the Briton looked after him with wide and wondering eyes. The youthful Roman knew the import of a guard from the Palatine; he noted in the aspect of the indomitable wife of Lucius her design to resist the invasion of her dwelling, and he hastened to leave a mutinous spot and a controversy which might involve him. Passing the centurion at the entrance with a hurried greeting, he fled down the steps from the lawn and into the thoroughfare.

Myrrha had fallen back with ghastly face and a strange flutter at the heart. She leaned against a pillar of the atrium, looking helplessly at the excited group about her, and noting the pitying and sympathetic glances bestowed upon her by Volgus. She scarcely understood the meaning of the sudden tumult, except that it related to some misfortune of which she was the subject. She had been so happy in the love which Fabyan had recently declared for her that she had felt that sorrow and fear could never reach her more, and the blow was so fierce and unexpected that she stood as one stunned under it. Dazed by the shock, she was powerless to do more than droop, resigned to her fate.

A slave in a chariot had hurried away to seek Lucius at the first imperious suggestion of his mistress, and now they stood in silence, Fulvia's breast heaving tumultuously.

"What must be done?" asked Valentina, presently. "The officer is waiting without."

Fulvia turned her eyes, now filled with tears, upon the hapless figure of her adopted daughter.

"She shall not go," she said. "In the absence of Lucius I shall not give her up."

"Thou hast heard," said Ethelred, looking at Valentina with a smile. "Bid me now go and send the soldiers back to court."

"Stay," said Volgus, as the young Briton turned upon his heel, laying a heavy and restraining hand upon his shoulder. "They would cut thee down in an instant. On our lives she goeth not, but this requires thought."

The ex-gladiator had never seen the command of a Cæsar disobeyed; it was a treason beyond his furthest knowledge. But he loved the household to which he was attached, and, much more, he loved the girl who was to be the wife of his early and worshipped master. He who had so many times faced Cæsar in the last salute, to die perhaps at his behest, was ready now to perish in behalf of the trembling and perplexed women before him.

A hail from the centurion without now came to them, and Valentina, bursting into tears, clasped Myrrha in her arms. The Briton's face paled. He set his teeth, and, stepping back upon his heel, silently drew his sword.

"'Tis enough," said Volgus, finally, speaking to Valentina. "Stand aside, sweet mistress, leaving our Myrrha to my reach, and go thou with thy mother to the centurion. Say that thou wouldst gladly obey his order but that a mad and rebellious slave restrains thee. Hasten!"

With eyes that understood and answered those of her faithful servitor, Fulvia stepped forward, but Valentina held back, looking fearfully at Ethelred.

"They will kill thee," she sobbed.

"Oh ho!" shouted the Briton, his face ablaze, trembling now throughout his frame and shaking his sword on high. "Send them in!"

Fulvia led Valentina through the vestibule and approached the impatient soldier.

"The general is away," she said, "and the order of our noble Emperor hath sore perplexed us. Yet I am in

haste to obey it but for a frightened slave who loves his mistress—a stout fellow whom I cannot control. We have too long pampered him, and he hath grown impudent. He will not see her depart."

"Bid him follow, then," said the centurion. "He may walk behind the litter if he will. They will deal with him at the palace; 'tis not my business. I must urge haste, for I have waited already."

"I am grieved but powerless," said Fulvia. "The freedman hath a companion with him, and my daughter is restrained by them. Thou must go and report it so at the Palatine. When my Lucius hath returned he will follow thee with an explanation. Have no fear; he will set thee right with Cæsar."

A Roman centurion was an officer who knew his duty. Trained to a fidelity that knew no swerving, and having behind him the traditions of a service dating back to the first walls of Rome, he was never embarrassed or afraid.

Saying not a word, he beckoned his two companions, and passed instantly through the vestibule and into the atrium.

Fulvia followed, but Valentina, with her face concealed in her hair, which she drew over her eyes, cowered behind the pillars without.

Myrrha stood yet within, a frightened maid supporting her and two tearful slaves immediately to her rear. Before her towered the great form of Volgus, while Ethelred, with his blade bare, stood to the front.

The centurion surveyed them calmly.

"I recognize thy daughter," he said to Fulvia, his head inclined slightly. "I have seen the noble lady many times. The litter awaits thee without, sweet mistress, and the men shall bear thee gently. Come."

"She goeth not," said Volgus. "Return to Cæsar and say thou couldst not find her—that she had left the house

of Lucius. Say what thou wilt to excuse thyself, but she goeth not."

The centurion stepped back, with an exclamation of anger.

"Thou art mad, indeed, old Colossus," he said. "Stand aside!" He folded his arms and nodded to his men. So certain was the ultimate result that direct resistance was unthinkable.

They stepped forward and, then pausing, drew their blades as that of Ethelred was thrust menacingly in their faces.

With a cry of astonishment the centurion drew his own weapon, and, shouting to the slaves without, closed in with his men upon the girl's protectors.

In an instant they had fallen. Volgus, with his bare hands, dashed the foremost to the floor, and wrenching his sword from his grasp drove it ringing against the breast-plate of the officer. The Briton had put his long point under the guard of the other, and, sending his weapon flying over his head, beat him down with the flat of his blade.

"Euge!" shouted Volgus, seizing the drooping Myrrha as though she were a child and swinging her above his great shoulder. "Strike no more, lad, but follow me!" He rushed from the atrium, with the Briton at his heels.

The litter-bearers had not the discipline of soldiers, nor, indeed, their courage. Thrown into confusion by the clamor within, it was a moment before they rallied to respond to the call of their chief. They made no effort to stop the giant form that passed them on the lawn, the white draperies of his burden fluttering in the breeze; nor did they face the active form with the shining blade that guarded his flight with long and menacing sweeps. They watched them disappear down the slope of the lawn and through a lane towards the Flaminian

Way; then they entered the vestibule to wait upon their leader.

The centurion was already upon his feet, his two soldiers striving to unlace his cuirass. The great dent which the blow of Volgus had made upon it pressed upon his breast and stopped his breathing, and it was with difficulty that he loosed the metal clasps, distorted by the blow. He was calm, in spite of his defeat, meeting the result with the stoicism of his class.

Fulvia sent the trembling slaves for basins of water to wash the wounds of the soldiers, and the centurion, losing his demeanor for an instant, turned with an imprecation to drive his litter-bearers from the room again to their station in front of the house.

"Our hurts are slight, noble mistress," he said. "Thy freedman struck carefully, though well. It is not expected that we win against giants, but I would we had let out the blood of that light barbarian. Who was this companion of thy freedman?"

"Companion, indeed," replied Fulvia, with a ready presence of mind, and glancing warningly at Valentina, who had now entered the apartment. "He is a friend whom the freedman met in the Subura, lately come to Rome to train with the gladiators. It accounts for his stand with Volgus."

"Truly; but we shall find him readily enough, and thou wilt lose thy servitor. I shall make true report to the noble prefect. The general, the noble Lucius, may straighten this tangled matter out, but I doubt if he can save the great fool who struck me down. I know him well, having seen him many times in the amphitheatre. He will doubtless be sent back to look from this time on for Cæsar's thumb turned down; the barbarian will go there too."

"Thou wilt take to Cæsar my regrets," said Fulvia, troubled now with thoughts of Myrrha, and trusting

that Volgus would keep her out of the soldiers' way until the return of Lucius.

"I will report the matter truly," said the centurion, resuming his breast-plate, which his followers had pressed into shape as best they could. "The maiden was here, and it was no fault of thine that I did not take her. Farewell."

"A courteous soldier," said Valentina, who had recovered herself sufficiently to find voice, now watching the troop disappear slowly down the slope. I am glad he was not slain in our house. How will this end?"

"Thy father must attend to that, girl. I have borne my portion up to now."

"Poor Volgus—and our Ethelred!" exclaimed Valentina, giving way again to tears. "They, at least, are doomed."

"Some one comes," cried Fulvia, suddenly. They started, thinking upon the instant that it was the soldiers returning, but the figure which stole cautiously through the vestibule was that of Paulo.

"Thy pardon!" he said, his voice broken in gasps. "I went not home; I waited without and saw Volgus, bearing Myrrha in his arms, fly down the Tripolo steps. Each moment I looked to see them plunge to death, so rapidly he moved. I am fearless, somewhat, but it frightened me. And our headlong friend, the Briton—who knows not enough to fear Cæsar—he came also, and at the same speed. Whither went they?"

"I would ask thee?" said Fulvia.

"I know not; they sped towards the Flaminian Way. What has happened? I saw the soldiers came later, but not in haste. I spoke good judgment ere I left. Lucius will do well to seek the influence of my father to aid him in this matter."

"I thank thee, lad; Lucius will do it, doubtless, should

the need arise," said Fulvia, Valentina remaining silent in spite of Paulo's desire that she should speak.

"Was there fighting? The Briton had his blade drawn —and he was fierce enough ere I went away. What is this — blood?" He noted the red stains upon the marbles of the floor.

"Blood, indeed," said Fulvia, moodily. "The soldiers went down before Volgus and young Ethelred like stalks before the gale."

"The soldiers of Cæsar!" cried Paulo, his eyes protruding. "They will die for it."

His consternation increased as Fulvia related to him the incidents of the encounter, but he was anxious to serve the disturbed and troubled women. He offered to search for Volgus and Myrrha, follow the messenger who had gone for Lucius, or go to the Palatine and make inquiries of a kinsman as to any excitement which should follow the return of the centurion.

Valentina would have had him perform this service, but Fulvia declined. She requested him to remain with them until Lucius should come, an invitation which he eagerly accepted, and they sat down to await that event with such patience as they could command.

Meantime her messenger did not tarry, and Lucius kept fleet steeds. Two of the swiftest in his stables, drawing the chariot which sought him, dashed along the broad avenue which led down the Pincian slope to the east, skirted the Circus of Sallust, and, passing through the Porta Collina, spread themselves like eagles in flight across the white plain towards the prætorian camp. Lucius was quickly found, and, scarce waiting to learn from the slave more than the fact that some urgent matter demanded his presence at home, followed with Fabyan as fast as their fleet horses could travel.

Under the reaction which had come to her, even his courageous wife was in tears as they entered his dwelling;

and as Valentina was speechless with fear and grief, it was Paulo who told them the first incidents of the visit of Cæsar's messenger.

Lucius listened, with a countenance that grew darker as the tale proceeded. Fabyan was scarcely less moved, and when he learned of the struggle in the atrium and the flight of Volgus with Myrrha his stout frame shook as though with palsy.

"'Tis a noble heart!" he exclaimed, when Fulvia spoke of Ethelred. "Twice am I in his debt, and my life is at his service. We shall save him from the consequences of his courage or share his fate."

"Keep the chariot without," directed Lucius, when his wife, supplementing the story of Paulo, had told him fully of the event. "I shall at once drive to the Palatine. I am old, and have not my former vigor, but, something the empire owes me for my years of service, my house is not to be invaded like the dwelling of an artisan. Nero may order me to banishment or send me to death, but not before I shall speak in the senate."

"Go," said Fabyan, after a moment of thought. "I know something of this, but we shall lose nothing by bearding the danger in the palace. If thou canst get a messenger in secret to Brabano, ask him to come this night to my house."

"Wilt not go with me?" asked his uncle.

"Nay; the assault is from Tigellinus, and is aimed at me. Warned as I was of his purpose, I strove to anticipate him last night. He hath had the last word, and speech from me is hopeless. Thou wilt fail in thy visit, though thou mayst gain time; that of itself is something. I go to seek Myrrha."

"Wait for her here," said Fulvia. "Volgus must return with her shortly."

Fabyan smiled gloomily.

"Volgus hath the wisdom of a servitor. He knows

with the instinct of an animal how hopeless is the stand against the hunter. He will not come back until warned that a return is safe. I will go and seek him."

He left the dwelling hastily, bending his steps in the direction of the Subura, as his uncle, mounting his chariot, set out for the Palatine.

XIX

DESPOT AND SENATOR

NERO and Tigellinus returned from the circus to the palace with their spirits exalted. The roll of the wheels over the smooth track, beaten hard and as level as a snowy plain, the rush of the rich air in their locks as they drove the fleet horses to their topmost speed, the spice of danger as they were whirled like the wind under the walls, had sent the blood tingling through their veins. It was a sport at which the favorite excelled, and Nero himself was a master in skill. They had met also a motley crew, and enjoyed the freedom of such association. Cainor, with the rude members of his official household; Virgil, and Placidus of the short sword and buckler; Hainor, of the net and trident; Calcus, of the cestus; Helchus, the Greek spear-thrower, and hundreds of others, sat upon the benches and cheered the races until the canopy above them echoed with the music of their deep throats. They had come down to the lower gardens of the Palatine, which were opened freely to the populace in the mornings, and Nero had ordered them admitted to the circus. There were women, too, a thousand, some from the Subura and others from the Transtibertine, flaunting in plume and color, and not yet returned to the occupations of their households since the festivities of yesterday. Nero had spoken to them as they flocked about the gate where he stood with the horses, repeating the announcement which Tigellinus had made to the patricians about the coming games, and

promising the gladiators new gold and honors if they fought with their accustomed valor.

Flushed with such a day, they came again to the palace, and as they entered the main corridor they found there the centurion, returned from his visit to the house of Lucius.

He was quiet and pale with the thought of the report he had to make. It meant to him—to his life and future—whatever the temper or humor of the prætor might be; but he waited with a certain stateliness the inevitable moment.

The quick eye of Tigellinus observed him as he stood with the Germans, missing no detail of his appearance, noting a weariness about his lips, and his golden cuirass wrinkled with the blow that had crushed in its front. He saw the evidences of some significant happening.

"Well, good Rufus," he said, in greeting, "thou hast returned?"

Tyrant though he was, and merciless in anger or dispute, the favorite was solicitous and considerate of the soldiers; it was a part of his popularity at the palace and one of the secrets of his hold upon Nero. He knew that the best friend of the army has always stood next to the throne. One of the reasons in the beginning for his hatred of Fabyan Amici was that the young tribune rivalled him in the esteem of the troops, and it was a bitter thought that this affection was earned, not by favors bestowed at home, but by merit in the field. He knew the respect in which Fabyan was held at the prætorian camp, and this modified and tempered the plans of his scheming brain.

Answering the question of his chief, the centurion bent his head, and then carried his hand to his helmet.

"Follow us," said Tigellinus, and with Nero he entered the Imperial apartments. Seating themselves, he

motioned the soldier to proceed, hearing without comment his report to the conclusion.

Nero's flushed face grew redder with wrath under the recital, but Tigellinus was thoughtful.

"So," he said, when the centurion had finished, "thou wert struck down by the giant Volgus, a former gladiator and of mighty strength; but this barbarian of whom thou speakest—he of the long sword—was his cloak of scarlet and his sandals laced with the thongs of a leopard's skin?"

"The same, noble prætor."

Tigellinus smiled.

"A vigorous young man, who is like to make some fame here in Rome. He pushed his long sword into my face the other day in a tent-shop in the Subura, caring little whether I was prætor or plebeian. I have a certain memory of him which touches me a little, but it will not pardon too much of that exuberant blade. Strange," he murmured, half musingly, "that he is present to aid the adopted daughter of Lucius. Almost, the gods seem to be in it. No matter," he continued, addressing the centurion; "we pardon thy failure with this giant, good Rufus, and will give thee further orders presently. We would not have thee slay him in the house of a senator, and to harm the girl was not our wish. Leave us."

The centurion departed, with his stately salute, his heart elate at his escape. When he had gone, Tigellinus turned to Nero.

"'Twas the absence of old Lucius," he said, "and the women were frightened. But for that the girl would have come, though he brought her himself. I looked for it and some conduct upon his coming that would have made certain our cause against him. He is too much a soldier to resist an order from his Emperor. He does not like the court, nor would he wish his daugh-

ter here; therefore my suggestion that you send for her. He hath drawn himself away, setting his house remotely on the Pincian, that he may plot and scheme with his disaffected senators unobserved and unmolested. The old knave owes something to the court; 'tis proper that he contribute of his family to its duties. If he disapprove of it, the worse for him."

"What follows?" asked Nero.

"'Tis a pretty scandal," replied Tigellinus, "but not of our making. The girl should come. Since the centurion was struck down and the girl has fled she must be found. Old Lucius must bring her now, or openly speak rebellion. With all his power thou canst now properly take his head."

"The more powerful he the more necessary that I have it," said Nero. "Order a search of the city for the giant and barbarian. We will put Volgus among the hyenas with a wooden sword, and with the barbarian thou canst use thy pleasure."

A slave entered to announce that the senator Lucius Amici was without and begged an audience with the Emperor.

Tigellinus smiled darkly.

"He comes early," he said.

Nero did not reply, but motioned to the slave to admit the visitor, and then turned and stepped to the window. He thrust his hands in the girdle of his tunic, and stood waiting and in thought until Lucius entered, following the slave.

The old man greeted the prætor with the respect due his rank, and then Nero left the window and resumed his seat. A red flush glowed upon his cheeks and his brow bent in anger. With a nod he dismissed the slave and looked at Lucius, who was standing.

"'Tis well thou art here," he said. "How comes it that my centurion is assaulted in thy hall, and an escort

to bring thy daughter to a place of honor near my person is met with violence and contempt? Treason in the house of an Amici is new in the history of Rome."

For a moment Lucius was speechless. Outraged at the violation of the sanctity of his home, he had come to make complaint and to demand for his household a future immunity. He could base his plea upon his rank as a patrician and his years of service for the empire; at the onset he was received in anger and met with a charge of treason.

The eyes of Tigellinus glistened with delight. His royal master needed little counsel in the art of dissimulation. Reared in the household of Claudius, reeking with the example and traditions of Messalina, schooled by an unscrupulous mother and taught wisdom by the profound Seneca, he was seldom in doubt as to the best means to accomplish his evil purposes. Naturally cunning, with an innate cruelty of mind that found a keen pleasure in the sufferings of others, the embarrassment of the titled and distinguished man before him filled him with gratification. Possessed as he was of absolute power, he knew where to circumscribe it. Goaded beyond endurance, a rat would turn in its hole, and the strong men of his dominion had more than once found means to strike from the dungeons in which they had been immured at the tyrants who had sent them to death. Slaves could be bribed to poison and assassins to kill; of this he had knowledge himself; but his life was valuable to those whom he kept in place, and he was confident of the loyalty of the people, before whom he posed as a benevolent ruler. It was the men of the senate, who knew him and despised him, that he must destroy, and his sternest censor now stood before him.

"Thou art right, noble Cæsar," said Lucius, at last, "to say that treason in the Amici is strange to the history of Rome. The gods forbid that it should ever be

otherwise. The services of myself and the chief members of my family with the legions of the empire should teach thee how little the word hath to do with us. It is true a centurion was assaulted in my house, but he came to take therefrom one of its beloved members, and the household of a Roman senator hath always been inviolate, even against the orders of Cæsar."

"Dost say so?" cried Nero, his voice vibrant. "The wishes of a Roman citizen above the commands of Cæsar?"

"I said the sanctity of a senator's household," replied Lucius, calmly. "I realize, great Emperor, the issue I am making."

"Truly?" said Nero.

Lucius bowed his head.

"A fatalist, indeed, or I am no poet," said Nero, with irony. "I asked thy daughter to a place of honor at court. Is it not proper that the family of Lucius should contribute to such duties?"

"Doubtless," replied the old man, his face perplexed, "but my Cæsar should have apprised me of such distinction. An armed guard is not sent to the house of a senator on a mission of peace."

"A senator!" exclaimed Nero, angrily. "'Tis an impudent office, and I hate the word. Throw it not so continually in my face, and remember thou art a general of the legions."

"But a senator, notwithstanding," replied Lucius, "and as a general I hate the word treason no less."

"'Tis a relief to know it," said Nero, with a sneer. "When may I look to see thee send thy daughter to the court?"

"She is to be wed shortly, noble Emperor—she is pledged as a bride to my nephew, the tribune Fabyan Amici, as he himself announced to thee. There are others who may wait upon the court."

The cruel gleam in the eyes of Nero grew intense.

"'Tis so, indeed," he said. "I had forgotten. But, thou hast another daughter. I recall that."

The face of the old man grew ghastly. There was no mistaking now the design of the tyrant.

"She likewise, noble Emperor, is to wed. Her mother hath mentioned the fact to me that she loves."

"Her mother hath mentioned it," mocked Nero.

"Felicitations," said the prætor, rising, his hand upon his breast and his smile like that of his master. "Is the name of the fortunate suitor announced?"

The eyes of Lucius grew more troubled. They were baiting him; tyrant and prætor were pressing him certainly to ruin. He saw his fate and prepared to meet it; sustained by his native courage, he stood a pathetic but dignified figure before his tormentors.

"The name is not announced, noble prætor."

"It is not likely," said Nero, turning to Tigellinus, "that we are to get further duty at the hands of our one-time servitor, unless it be in the senate, which the gods forbid! It is in the senate, mayhap, where he hath learned of the word which I have used, and which so seriously offends him; he surely learned no treason in the field."

"I have learned not treason anywhere," replied Lucius, "nor do I know it now. I have had always the faith and confidence of the legions and their masters."

"Rely not too much upon the faith of the legions, my Lucius," said Nero, menacingly. "They belong to me; put thy faith in him who is master of the legions. I will consider of the matter of thy daughter Myrrha for the present, but meantime she is not to wed the tribune; nor will I trouble thee to send to me the knaves who resisted my centurion in thy house. The prætor will see that the guards hunt them out. Thou canst go."

Lucius inclined his head, his face still pale, and left

the apartment. His step did not falter as he passed along the marble corridor, and the lounging German guard knew nothing of the tempest that raged within the breast of the respected senator and general. He mounted his chariot at the Imperial gate, and drove slowly through the Forum Romanum and along the Via Lata to its junction with the Flaminian Way. His heart was heavy within him, for he had reached the end of the fortunes of his house. The nuptials of Fabyan with his daughter, his beloved Myrrha, were denied, and he had aroused the hatred of his Imperial master and the malicious and powerful prætor. He was too old to head a revolt, and though his rank and station might save him from death or banishment they would not protect his household from the designs of the tyrant. Nero had said that he would not press the order for Myrrha's attendance at court, but Lucius could not rely upon it. At any hour a centurion, with a force not to be resisted, might again appear at his door, and a second summons must be obeyed.

He did not return home at once, but halting his slave he bade him retrace his way, and drove back through the Forum of Trajan to the house of Fabyan on the Viminalis.

Fabyan was at home and met him at the entrance.

"Didst thou get word to Brabano?"

Lucius shook his head; in his grief he had forgotten.

"Enter," said his nephew, aiding him to alight and bidding the slave await with the chariot. "I will send a messenger to the Palatine at once. We have a friend within."

Lucius followed him through the atrium to an inner chamber. The Briton, his scarlet cloak about his shoulders, arose from a couch to greet them, as Fabyan closed the door and drew the curtains between the pillars.

"Myrrha—where is she?" asked Lucius, looking at Ethelred.

"Safe for the present if we are wise," replied Fabyan. "Volgus carried her to the shop of Paul in the Subura. She is lodged with a family related to Zekiah. Volgus will wait with her. What knowest thou?"

Lucius seated himself wearily.

"Ahenobarbus received me as an enemy, talked of treason, and forbade thy marriage for the present. The charioteer was with him, drunken, elate, and leering his triumph as the young straw-head berated me. 'Tis over with us."

Ethelred looked at his white hair and noble form, majestic in the fold of his toga despite his grief, with eyes full of sympathy.

"He forbade my marriage to Myrrha?" asked Fabyan.

"He said so."

The soldier ground his teeth.

"'Tis not over with us," he said, "nor will it be while I am free and have strength to fight. I will wed Myrrha, if it be on the eve of my death, though a thousand tyrants forbid it. Tigellinus may look to himself."

"Thy threats are natural but impotent," said Lucius. "We are helpless."

"Our fortunes are indeed changed," said Fabyan, gloomily, after a moment's pause. "A strange circumstance that makes the Amici plotters. Return home, uncle, and tell my aunt that Myrrha must remain away, and can be visited only in secret, lest the spies of Cæsar be led to her. And thou, Ethelred, must find something less striking than thy present garb. My slaves will fit thee here. I shall see Brabano to-night, good uncle, and bring thee word to-morrow of his counsel."

"And thou wilt say to thy gentle daughter—she at thy house"—said Ethelred, as Lucius arose to depart, "that I will come to visit if it be considered safe. I

will come in secret and after nightfall if I have thy permission."

Lucius looked at him, with a kindly light stealing upon his tired features.

"Fulvia spoke of thy gallant bearing," he said, "and it warmed my heart as a soldier."

"She is a soldier's wife," cried Ethelred, his face reddening, "and her kindliness hath warmed my heart as a man. Is it unnatural that I have seen her beauties and her virtues in her daughter?"

"Come," said Lucius, extending his hand; "come when thou wilt, at any cost. Thou hast my permission."

Fabyan pressed the young man back, as he would have followed them without, but himself accompanied his uncle to his chariot and saw him drive away towards his home.

XX

MYRRHA'S REFUGE

WHEN Myrrha recovered her swimming senses and came to think with reason and calmness upon the events of which she had been the victim, she found herself resting upon a couch in a low chamber of a series of humble apartments which looked upon the inner court of a building screened by walls from the streets on all sides. It was a portion of the city in which she had never before been and of which she had but dimly heard. The people of the apartments were strangers, but they had received her kindly and treated her with the utmost tenderness. Two women spoke in low tones in an adjoining room, and a little child, a girl, peeped curiously at her through the narrow doorway intervening. Volgus was gone, but she occasionally heard his gruff tones arising from the court-yard below, for her little room looked out upon the veranda of a second story.

She recalled, as in a dream, the visit of the centurion, his attempt to take her from her home, and the conflict with Volgus. Almost now she could shriek in terror as she remembered the approach of the soldiers and their threatening looks. Then she recalled their rapid flight, the gentleness of Ethelred when Volgus, reaching the Flaminian Way, had placed her upon her feet, and how together they had aided her unsteady steps to this place. They had entered the building by a little shop below, where Paul, whom she remembered, and who was Fabyan's friend, had met them with alarm and sympathy,

and then Zekiah, whom she knew to be a tradesman with whom her family dealt, came also with words of cheer and comfort, and Fabyan came shortly after. His visit had cleared the mist from her mind and dried her tears, and she was contented and even happy in the recollection of his words. His hands had clasped hers, and his caresses yet thrilled her memory. She experienced a sense of rest and relief, as though she had recovered from a great fatigue. She knew that she must remain hidden for a time; Fabyan had said that it was necessary for their mutual safety, but her uncle would arrange to have Nero abandon his designs. It was not a serious hardship, although the experience was strange. Her slave would be brought to wait upon her, with clothing and comforts from her home. Her family would visit her, and, if possible, Valentina would come upon the morrow. But behind all was the fact that Fabyan would be constantly near her, his mind filled with but the one thought of her safety.

The child looked again into the room, and, encouraged by the smile of welcome, stole to her side, and then the two women followed. One bore a cup of steaming tea and a platter, upon which was a thin, crisp loaf. Myrrha remembered to have seen its like in her childhood, baked by the hand of her mother.

"Thou must be hungry," said the woman, with a smile. "The drink will do thee good."

Myrrha was hungry and received it gladly, and when she had finished was refreshed.

The women sat by, regarding her with steadfast eyes, curious, but so kindly that the girl was conscious of no offence, but rather a feeling of gratitude for the sympathy they so obviously expressed.

They were neatly dressed and of pleasant form and feature, and a scrupulous cleanliness pervaded the entire surroundings.

As the elder removed the tray from the couch and placed it upon a stand near by, she spoke again, her voice low and of winning sweetness.

"Gabrial will be surprised when he returns to find an addition to his household, but he would die for our great Paul, as would we all. Not but what we are glad to have thee, sweet one—it was wrong of me to put it so foolishly—but I wanted to warn thee of his coming. He is my husband, and I am Ruth; this is my sister, Miriam," and she indicated her companion.

"Miriam! 'tis my own name, as it was my mother's," said Myrrha. "My father, Petria, shortened it in his affection, calling us each by the love-term I now bear. And the child—the sweet one clinging to thee?"

"She hath the name of names," said the mother, fondly. "'Tis Mary."

Myrrha wondered at the meaning of these words, but said nothing, feeling as yet strange to her surroundings.

The noise of heavy feet was heard upon the stairway, and Ruth arose.

"Gabrial!" she exclaimed.

"Thou knowest his footstep," laughed her sister, "but he is not alone. There is a heavy tread that shakes our poor house."

"Paul comes," said Ruth, looking through the door.

"Verily," said Miriam; "but not Paul alone."

Myrrha arose up on her couch as three figures entered. They were Paul, Volgus, and a stranger.

"This is Gabrial," said Paul, presenting him. "'Tis his roof that shelters thee. May thy coming bring a blessing to you both!"

"Amen!" muttered the man, reverently.

Myrrha looked at him with interest as she greeted him. He was tall, with dark hair and eyes, and a skin of exceeding whiteness. A beard, black and soft and silky,

covered his mouth and chin, and he wore the tunic of an artisan.

"I give thee welcome," he said to her, lifting his eyes and pausing, "in His name."

"Thou art a Christian?" she asked.

"Ay," replied Paul. "All here are Christians."

"Except myself," broke in Volgus, abruptly. "I am a most unchristian man, as my dear mistress knows. Hadst thou seen me smiting the centurion and his soldiers thou wouldst have learned how quickly thy teachings were shaken from me. I was a gladiator still, wicked and unregenerate."

"'Twas righteously done, as I have heard it," said Gabrial. "It is not forbidden us to smite the wicked."

"I have not reproved thee, brother," said Paul. "Being absent, I judge not."

"Nay," said Myrrha, smiling. "I will speak for Volgus."

"And I," said Paul, laying his hand upon the giant's shoulder—"I shall speak for him and pray for him."

"Christ be with us all!" said Gabrial, humbly. "Two of the brethren were taken from the quarry to-day. I went there for a block out of which to chisel the stone figure for the house of Dentes, and saw them borne away in chains. They are the first I have seen taken on this side, but this morning some forty were sent to the dungeons from beyond the Tiber. Isaac told me."

Miriam uttered a low groan, and Ruth rose to her feet, with clasped hands.

"Art thou in danger?" she gasped.

"Peace, sister!" said the Apostle. "Be comforted in the knowledge that there is never danger; we are in God's hands."

"I have been without fear," said Gabrial. "The soldiers have sought mostly beyond the river, because there is the Ghetto, and they look only among our people for

Christians; they little suspect that God's followers may be also among the others. Our meetings have been there, and Cæsar's spies have been principally through the Transtibertine. We are safe here for the present, at least. They will look for few Christians in the Subura."

"They arrest without warrant," said Paul, "but it matters not. Cæsar needs little warrant, and it is the Master's will. We will speak for the brethren at the meeting to-night, and God will hear us."

Another step rang upon the stairs, and in a moment Ethelred appeared upon the veranda. Volgus bade him enter, and, observing the others, he came with quiet deference into the chamber.

He greeted Myrrha gently, pleased at her recovery and evident tranquillity, and clasped the hand which Gabrial extended to him. He was obviously known to all of them, the women as well, for the child ran to his embrace with a cry of pleasure, resisting the efforts of her mother to take her from his arms.

"Thou hast lost thy colors," said Volgus, observing him.

"Ay," he answered, carelessly. "The Lord Fabyan thought my scarlet cloak a mark for too ready notice, and I exchanged it for this."

He stepped back and shook from his shoulder the sober garment with which the slave of Fabyan had provided him.

"My sandals, also, are Roman," he continued, "and, had I not protested, they would have armed me with a short sword and perhaps a buckler. Doubtless a wise precaution, in view of the fact that Cæsar's soldiers will now hunt the city over for us. Thou wilt need no change of cloak, old Volgus; 'tis not a garment that will betray thee to the lictors."

"I think this old hulk is known to them somewhat," replied the giant, good-humoredly. "They have seen it

so seldom in flight that it must have been to them a strange picture as I went down the Pincian slope, as though the wild dogs of the Caucasus plains were at my heels. I had thought never to run from man, but, bearing my mistress, I had truly the speed of wings. And I was frightened, too—verily, as I have never been in the amphitheatre, with the point of my adversary even against my heart."

"Thou art my preserver," said Myrrha, gratefully. "Had I gone to Cæsar I should have died of fear."

"Thou art safe here," said Gabrial, soothingly. "The soldiers will have no thought to find thee in such a place."

"I have no longer any fear," replied Myrrha, smiling at him through the tears that rose again to her eyes. "Since I have yet my faithful Volgus, and thou art more than kind to me, I am content. My father will see thee properly rewarded."

"We have our reward already, dear child," said Ruth, tenderly, "in the pleasure of ministering to thee. Trouble not thy pretty head about any thought except that thou art welcome. Come, Miriam," she continued, to her sister, "find for these men seats at the table in the other chamber, and we will give the tired one an opportunity for rest. Now that they have assured themselves again of her safety and comfort they may leave her in peace. The Lord Fabyan hath said that friends of her household will come shortly, when it is night."

"We will keep watch without," said Gabrial, as they withdrew. "We shall see that no spies dog the steps of any who come to this place."

Myrrha thanked him again as he passed through the doorway, and then observed that, while the others departed, Ethelred and Paul yet lingered in the room.

"I have come from our Fabyan," said the young man, "and he sent thee a message, although he had just left thy side. Thou canst guess it."

"Ay," she said, with a blush, her dark eyes drooping and her bosom heaving under its white robe. "I can guess it."

"I would," he continued, with a smile, "that some one would bear such a message to her whom I love, and that she receive it with the look which I see upon thy face."

Myrrha laughed confusedly, her teeth of pearl gleamed between the red of her lips.

"Truly," said Paul, in a deep voice, "thou art lovely and beautiful to look upon."

Myrrha started, and Ethelred was surprised at the intensity of his manner. The Apostle was gazing upon the girl with a fixedness that betrayed some strong emotion. Such was the purity of his brow, the noble outline of his fine and earnest face, bearing usually a holy calm and hallowed by the depth of its thought and purpose, that the wondering girl felt no sense of alarm. Fabyan had called her beautiful, and she had heard his love and praise with a thrill at the heart, but from the lips of Paul this acknowledgment fell upon her ears with the sense of a different meaning, and she marvelled to know wherein she had stirred his grave interest and why she was commended.

"I will grant thy saying true," laughed Ethelred, as the Apostle was silent after his abrupt speech, "although I do it with reluctance; not on account of our lovely Myrrha, but upon my own part with becoming modesty. Was it not thou who saidst that this dear love of our Fabyan in feature resembled me?"

"I said it," replied Paul, searching his face with his eyes, his voice serious. "Hadst thou a mirror thou mightst know the truth thyself."

Myrrha was startled at his words and turned her glance upon the face of the Briton.

"Valentina hath remarked it," she said, "and I have

myself felt some strange familiarity when with thee, good Ethelred. Since thou art a son by adoption merely —my own relation to my revered father Lucius — and thine own father is otherwise childless, I might come to thee as a sister, if thou wouldst have me in so near a relationship."

"I will welcome thee gladly and sue for such a favor," answered the young man, kissing her hand gallantly. "I envied old Volgus his privilege of bearing thee away."

"So said my Fabyan," she replied, laughing merrily; "but neither would have found me so light a burden."

"Brother and sister," said Paul, absently. "Almost it should be so."

"I had a sister once," said Ethelred.

"Thou!" exclaimed Myrrha, in surprise. "Is she dead?" Her voice was full of sympathy.

"Yes," he replied, "she is dead. It is long ago, and I scarce remember her; and yet I know that I loved her dearly, and grieved much when she was lost."

"Where?" asked Paul.

"I know not," replied Ethelred. "I was young, and the days are vague and indistinct. My mother perished at the same time, and my heart was broken. 'Twas the suffering which followed that made my memory dim."

They left her now, joining the others in the adjacent room, and, once more alone, the girl gave herself over to reflection. For a time she thought of the young man just gone, wondering wherein she so much resembled him and the cause therefor—of the sister of whom he had spoken and who was dead—and then she struggled with recollections faint within her own mind of a childhood that seemed to know something of a brother. The form was there, a very ghost in outline of a substance so shadowy that she recognized no feature; and yet, as her mind dwelt upon it, the image intensified. As in a dream, she saw the face of Tigellinus, but the evil smile about

his lips when she had seen him last was wanting; he spoke to her, too, and his voice was soft, and she found no terror, but rather a pleasure, in his words. They were playing in a vineyard, with a stretch of blue sea spreading from the base of a green hill, and the sun shone upon it with a warm and tender light; the surface was broken now into a fringe of foam, the summer breeze dancing over it. There was a cottage, near which grew roses, and her mother's face looked from a bowered window, and she called a name.

Myrrha placed her hand upon her lips, as though to touch them into life, looking with wide eyes at the ceiling, so vivid had the picture grown; she struggled almost, to frame with her own voice the word that her memory could not fashion — the name that murmured through her brain with an echo so faint that it just missed her consciousness. Then came another figure, a child — a boy, who joined them under the vines, and her mother called once more from the casement. Again her heart fluttered as she strove to hear the name to which the boy responded, but she could not; 'twas a fantasy indeed, when the boy, turning his face to hers, revealed a childish Ethelred. The spot was beautiful, there was a balmy odor in the air that came yet to her nostrils, and she knew that she was happy.

The picture vanished; she was thinking now of Fabyan; there was no longer a struggle to recall a fleeting fancy, but her mind went to rest as though his loving hand was pressed upon her brow; her tired eyes closed under the magic of his gentle touch, and, with a sigh which parted her lips in a smile of rapture, she slept.

The Apostle had stepped to the door and again looked in upon her. She was indeed lovely and beautiful, as he had said. Her face against the coarse linen of the pillow held him as in a spell, and he, too, had dreams. The lowly chamber, sanctified by love and breathing the pure

emotions of sympathy and hope in a common heart, inspired them. Through the troublesome years of many wanderings, bearing his Master's cross over heated distances and thirsty track, his memory went like a flash of light to his days of boyhood. The face before him was not strange; despite his beard, the seams of his brow, and his rugged age, he had slept beside it in a lowly bed and had seen the lips so parted and such a smile about them; he had kissed them under the curling tresses of a little child, and her bared feet had followed his own most lovingly as he led her infant steps about the familiar paths of Tarsus. Miriam, the sister of his youth!—the blessed woman who had received him first when he had returned from his eventful journey, and gave him the sympathy and confidence of her belief; to whom he had first told the story of the redemption of his soul and the message which had come to him from on high; who had bowed in recognition of its meaning, and had become the first fruit of his conquest for his Master. Miriam! true thereafter, clinging to the faith—she whom he had loved with the only passion woman had stirred in his strong soul, and whom he had lost during his first fateful mission for the cross.

She had been wedded, and gone with her husband from her native home. The Apostle had returned, with John Mark, to learn of her absence, but was cheered by the knowledge of her safety and happiness. The years passed and she came again to Tarsus, but Paul was now about the labor which involved all his thoughts. He knew that she had children, and looked forward with a mighty longing to hold them in his arms and bless them in the name of Christ. He knew that her spirit had hallowed her household, and that her husband worshipped with her. But he came too late. When once more he found himself beneath the shade of the ancient olives the Roman soldiers had preceded him. Miriam the be-

loved, her husband slain, had gone with her babes to the fortunes of a Roman slave.

He had needed the saving grace which he had preached to others, and it did not fail him. The hand that raised Lazarus supported him still. The voice that he had heard at noonday now spoke to him in the night of his sorrow. "Go ye," it said, "and as ye do unto others, so shall it be done unto you." Miriam was in God's hand, and He was a father to the fatherless. What mattered it if he saw her not again on earth, since they would meet for all time in heaven?

Yet now he stood and looked upon the face of the sleeping girl with a strange tugging at his old heart-strings. Something smote him upon the breast. He had long reached the point when everything happened in the name of his Master. All his emotions were holy. Whenever God suffered the tears to fall from his stern eyes, the sorrow was blessed, and now he wept under the sense of a new joy. Praised and glorified be the name of Christ! God was foreshadowing some new crisis in his life!

He turned away from the doorway, lifting his hand to enjoin silence, for Fabyan and Valentina, with Myrrha's maid, had entered the outer apartment.

XXI

THE CONSPIRACY

NOTWITHSTANDING his high position at the court of Cæsar, Brabano acted with the caution and reserve of its humblest freedman. He avoided even the appearance of evil. He knew the character of Nero, the influences which surrounded him, the potency of Tigellinus, and the power of blandishment which lay in the arts of Poppæa. He had weighed them all. He knew also the limitations upon his own influence, and, therefore, carefully guarded his conduct. Behind a good name and a demeanor without suspicion he might make his plans and weave his nets with a prospect of success, but once under the ban and subjected to the surveillance of the keen-eyed Tigellinus, important though he was to both Nero and Poppæa, his career was at an end. He did not yet know of the action which had been taken by Nero and his favorite against the Amici. If he had, it would have caused him grave concern, and he would have received with some alarm the request sent him by Fabyan for a conference at his home on the Viminalis. He was ambitious, but he was not prepared to cast his fortunes with a falling house and abide the issue. He looked to success at any cost, and considering the vastness of his schemes he could afford to do no less. His plans held not alone his own destiny, but the destinies of his race and of the empire. Even had he known of Fabyan's dilemma he would have found a way to make the conference, relying upon his wit and resources if

Tigellinus became apprised of his visit. He was known as a friend of Lucius; but all who had fallen under Nero's displeasure had had friends, and these had deserted or betrayed the unfortunates to the tyrant. Such was the natural conduct of those attached to the Imperial court, and it could well be thought that he would follow it.

These reflections passed through his mind as later, in an upper chamber of Fabyan's house, he waited with some impatience the coming of his friend.

Following the sending of his message Fabyan had gone to the shop in the Subura, taking thither Valentina, who was in a fever of anxiety to be again with Myrrha. He had not yet returned to his house, where the physician had been a half-hour awaiting him.

Fabyan had asked Paul to accompany him, but the Apostle was to hold a meeting beyond the Tiber. Ethelred had been invited, but declined; Gabrial, with Volgus, Ruth, Miriam, and Mary, was to go with Paul, and the young Briton, with the prospect of an uninterrupted evening with Valentina and Myrrha, permitted Fabyan to return alone.

The physician was no idle dreamer. The conditions about him were growing ripe for a guiding hand. Nero's life, in even the natural course of his present conduct, was to be short, though no agency, secret or overt, struck him down. Rome was filled with a nameless discontent, created by uncertainty and fostered by fear. The hand that lifted the eagles when he fell might keep them aloft if it also grasped a sword. Given any support and the allegiance of the prætorians, and a new dynasty would stand; and Brabano knew that any support, both civil and prætorian, could be bought. He knew, also, who held in keeping the affections of the fickle Poppæa, and here was the touchstone of a hundred subtle avenues of knowledge. Hence, amid profligacy he was staid, amid

extravagance he was thrifty, ever watchful of any chance which might arise to serve his purpose.

When Fabyan entered the chamber at his home wherein the physician awaited him, his guest knew immediately that something of moment had happened. Fabyan hastened to tell him, and he listened quietly to the exciting story, his face grave with its import. When it was finished he continued silent, and Fabyan, impressed by his manner, stirred uneasily upon the couch opposite the one upon which his friend and listener was seated.

"Nay, I pity thy perplexity; but relax thy features," said the physician, with a smile, touching him lightly with his white fingers. "I know 'tis not fear, but rather anxiety for her whom thou lovest. We shall find a way out of this tangle if we cut it with a sword. Oil and water will not mix, and Nero and Tigellinus could not live long in harmony with the Amici. 'Tis time to prepare for the certain conflict. I will see Lucius."

"He is old," said Fabyan, "and sick at heart with the thought that he must peril the time of life that should be tranquil with conspiracy and strife. But he loves liberty, and, better still, his name and household. He will strike for them to the death."

"And thou?" asked Brabano.

Fabyan looked at him, his eyes dark with meaning.

"Lucius knows the senate," said Brabano, "as in part do I. Thou shouldst know the army. How many among the younger officers are subject to influence?"

"One is sufficient," said Fabyan. "Myself."

"I think not," replied Brabano, coldly. "Thou didst not bring me to thy house to hear such folly. That is fury and revenge, not wisdom. What profiteth it to thy Myrrha or thy kindred to strike down an emperor and pay the price to the sword of the nearest German? Even the successor of a tyrant — the man who may profit by his fall—should reward him who slew an assas-

sin. It is different when the dagger is wielded by a patriot."

"Truly," said Fabyan, his emotion subsiding. "Thou art right, and I am more than wrong."

"A conspirator," said Brabano, quietly, "is either a knave, a Nemesis, or a man having the aspirations of a demi-god; the knave should fail, the Nemesis contributes his own death to his vengeance, and while ridding the state of a tyrant may yet inflict an injustice upon those to whom he may owe the duty of life; but he who strikes for virtue's sake and the public good hath surely the aid and comfort of the gods. There are Demetrius, Flavius, and Steno of the senate ripe for revolt and a confederation with any course. The prætorians can be won if thou wilt go among them, and if we can persuade Paul to preach to the temper and prejudice of the river people and the Subura there need be little danger in Nero's fall."

"He is preaching to-night," said Fabyan. "We can count on Paul from neither motives of folly or revenge. Perhaps he may see in Nero a menace to his faith and join us because of it. He will never strike in his own behalf."

"Then I mistake him," said Brabano, sternly. "Doth he not love his people? The dungeons are filling with them, men and women; they will be thrown like dogs into the arena. Hath he no pity in his bowels for those whom he persuades to a course that threatens death, and will he not strike to make his converts safe? If not, he deserveth to go himself to the beasts."

"Thou dost not understand him," replied Fabyan. "He would go himself to the beasts, as he would see others go there, but for the faith, and not for a lack of pity. He would shield me with his own life, but if a martyr's end would work to the good of those who love his Lord he would give me his blessing and bid me go boldly to it,"

"I will look to this fully," said Brabano. "I will see this Peter and know more of this faith. Meantime, we must make no errors. We have some plans already, and I deem it safe now to mention names. Thou knowest Piso, and would not think him a conspirator. Ay," and the physician lifted a warning hand, "it is so. Outside of Rome, and through all the provinces, we have those who will rise at the word and strike the tyrant down. We shall welcome the Amici among us."

"That will save us," said Fabyan. "Thou wilt find us ready."

"It will save thee if it come in time; if not it will avenge thee and save the empire."

"How soon shall we be ready?" asked Fabyan.

"Haste is a bad general," replied the physician. "We shall delay until success is certain. When I have seen Lucius thou wilt be assigned a part."

"I will welcome it," said Fabyan. "But now—my Myrrha is in hiding, and Volgus and Ethelred, my servant and friend, will be sought for to the death. Nero will leave no stone in Rome unturned. My own future is uncertain, but that I could endure; yet Lucius and his family—what of them?"

"The tyrant is fast enough, but there will be little haste here; why should there be when he is certain of the end? Lucius hath influence and power, and to inflict upon him outrage would be unwise; Tigellinus knows this. Thou, thyself, hast a following and canst not be causelessly wronged. Nero will strike, but he must first invent a cause; if thou art cautious thou wilt delay it. As I said to thee, I will be watchful, and all that I may do for thee and thine, without putting in danger the cause of Piso, I will do gladly."

"I thank thee," said Fabyan, gratefully. "I will be prudent."

"Lucius will need no injunction," said Brabano.

"Meantime, be led into no excess. Keep thy Myrrha secret; allege, perhaps, that she hath fled with the slave and cannot be found. Aid something in the search, if it come to that, and bid Volgus and the barbarian go forth only at night. Thou wilt not wear out so crafty a foe as Tigellinus, but thou mayst delay him."

Brabano departed, returning directly to the Palatine. While he desired to see Lucius, he did not deem it best to go to-night from the Viminalis to the Pincian. There might be spies about, and the anger of Nero against the Amici was fresh. While Tigellinus would lack in nothing, the enmity of the Emperor would cool within the days to follow, submerged in the pleasures to which he was addicted. Should Lucius and Fabyan follow his counsel, the physician felt that for the time they were safe. When he had gone Fabyan donned his cloak, and, pulling the hilt of his sword within easy reach, set out again to see Myrrha. The hour was not late, and he would find the girls yet alone with Ethelred. He went unattended, first bidding his slaves keep careful watch about his dwelling to warn him of any persons seen loitering near.

As he turned from the Via Augusta into the Forum Pacis he met a throng of howling people, clustered about a file of soldiers, who pressed with their spears steadily through the mass. Shouts and imprecations filled the air, cries of anger with threats were hurled into the faces of the escort, and staves and stones menaced it. The guard pressed forward, unmindful of the tumult. The leader, a tall German, surveyed the excited crowd with unruffled countenance, bidding the torch-bearers keep well within the protection of the shields and instructing his followers to hold the prisoners they were guarding well within their ranks. Leading his men he reached the corner of a street which entered the Forum Pacis from the south. A stone thrown from the throng glanced

along his corselet and fell to the earth. He leaped forward a pace, beat the offender between the shoulders with his clinched fists, and then brought his men to a halt. For a moment he stood irresolute. Pushing his helmet back from his brow, and wiping the sweat from his forehead, he peered into the narrow street, striving to pierce its gloom; he sought to determine if he might safely venture in with his men. If it were clear, it would free him in a measure from the threatening rabble, and a rear guard might keep them back as his men passed through the narrow way.

Fabyan recognized the German as one of the palace guard; he was not an officer, but, like all the palace troop, noted for steadfast courage and fidelity.

"What is it, Marcus?" he asked, dropping the folds of his cloak from his face and speaking in a low tone; "what prisoners are these?"

The soldier touched his helmet as he recognized the tribune, and the crowd drew away in the presence of one whom they guessed to be patrician.

"Some malefactors who were discovered to-day by spies, and whom I was sent to take. They are Christians, so-called, and I am conveying them to the dungeons of the amphitheatre. These are their friends, who follow after us."

Fabyan looked among the torches. A body of men, palefaced and frightened, were ministering to some drooping women, who, with covered heads, were sobbing under their cloaks. Two children clung to their garments, shrinking timidly from the swaying weapons of the guards that rattled against the metal of their short skirts, beating about the children's heads; their little faces were swollen with grief and their eyes crusted with the salt of tears; but they were silent, their sobs gone now in a terror that paralyzed sound.

"We are to hunt two fugitives, noble tribune, through-

out the city," continued Marcus. "The guard hath been instructed to proceed from house to house, leaving none unquestioned—an ex-gladiator and a barbarian. The gladiator is well known but the barbarian is a stranger. From the description, I have said that I saw and talked with him, and hence am to be kept upon the search. I went to-day as far as the temple of Agrippa, but could learn nothing. It is probable that they have left the city, and must be looked for along the coast."

Fabyan's gaze went again to the hapless group, crushed and stricken with the sudden misfortune which had come to them. Christians! How were they criminals, and of what were they guilty? His Myrrha might well be among them, and he himself was rapidly approaching a state of mind that bordered upon belief. A lump rose to his throat.

"'Tis probable," he said, "that such fugitives would be like to leave the city. They might be fools to linger in a place of danger, when the world is wide outside. There are fewer eyes in the south than in Rome. Devote thy labors beyond the city, Marcus, and I will myself order the guards to search the coast."

He raised his hand as signal for the escort to proceed.

The soldier dropped his spear and proceeded with his men, entering the narrow street. The crowd, subdued, but still following, pressed after them, and Fabyan, making his way across the Forum, turned towards the left in the direction of Paul's shop. The news he had just received disturbed him. While he had looked to see some early action against Volgus and Ethelred, it had come too quickly, and was pushed with a greater vigor than he had thought. The giant was a conspicuous figure at all times, and even in the night he might be seen as he went through the streets, and, if not taken, followed to his place of hiding and captured upon the succeeding day. Fabyan resolved to caution him to

stay closely within doors, or to change his place of refuge to one that did not shelter Myrrha. There were many such beyond the river. About the Subura and near the haunts of his former companions he was known too well, and it was here that the lictors would most likely seek him. Myrrha would be looked for elsewhere. Lucius had kindred who lived in the country places beyond the Vatican hill, and it was in that vicinity that the spies of Tigellinus would think to find her.

His mind so busy, he reached the place of his destination. The street was dark, lighted only by the dim flicker of a distant torch swinging in an iron basket from a chain attached to the arch of a wall that spanned the way. A narrow passage, scarce offering space for a single person, was a black slit between the houses, and into this he went, feeling his way between the buildings until he reached the gate which opened to the inner court. He pressed aside the bolt, and, passing through, he found the stairs and made his way to the balcony above. A light came from the chamber which was occupied by Myrrha, and he heard the sound of voices. He recognized the laugh of Valentina, mingled with the tones of Ethelred; then Myrrha spoke, and the weight upon his heart lifted. Despite the grim surroundings, the gloom and secrecy, the necessity that kept her a hidden prisoner, and the future filled with danger, love, outweighing all, could banish care. He stopped for a moment in the night. Paul would return shortly from a meeting of people, about whom the same sad fortunes lingered. Yet he and they, defying danger and mocking death, could laugh, as these lovers, at adversity, under the inspiration of a faith that, like love, knew neither grim surroundings, secrecy, nor gloom.

XXII

A RESPITE

WHILE the disposition of Nero to poetry had contributed greatly to the rise of those who loved to flatter him, it was likewise at times a source of embarrassment. Tigellinus found it so. He was the most successful of the sycophants, although Petronius Arbiter and Vestinus, and the shrewd Malito, pressed closely upon him; but, the most industrious, he had also a special art in adulation. Handsome and accomplished himself, he was accustomed to the praise of those below him, and knew, therefore, the better how to bestow it. Lucan despised him out of jealousy, declaring him rude, and, because he had been a charioteer, alleging that he had no wit; Petronius hated him for his brutal frankness, affirming him lewd, which he was, and illiterate, which he was not. In truth, he was himself a romanticist, a lover of verse and music, and, above all, a lover of women. It was he who discovered the winning seductiveness of Poppæa, and had imparted to Otho the corrupt advantages of complaisance; who had skilfully commended to Nero the color of her loveliness and won the reward of this better knowledge of his weakness. Petronius was cynical, Lucan quoted the morality of his gifted uncle, Vestinus composed a rhyme to loyalty, and praised the charms of the Greek girl, Acte, to whom Nero was attached—all were jealous, but the Sicilian was ever the wiser. His tendency to the games, his tact and judgment in the arrangement of *fêtes* and pleasures,

and his patronage of the actors kept his place. But it was the vanity and not the will of Nero that yielded always to adulation. Often he upset the best plans of those about him by following some sudden caprice. Upon one occasion he hung the court in mourning upon the eve of a feast, keeping it in gloom for days, while he conceived a lyric in memory of his dead child. He stopped the races at the circus after weeks of preparation and the assembling of a vast audience because his favorite Arabian stumbled before his podium; he professed to regard it as an omen of ill. He destroyed by fire the temple of Vesta in order that he might find an inspiration for an ode to purity. Now he had determined to absent himself from Rome, and this at a time when of all others the favorite most desired him to remain. Upon the rocky island of Capreæ he had a summer palace, the splendid Villa Jovis, kept constantly in repair to await the caprice of his coming. It was one of the twelve great structures built upon this enchanted spot by his great predecessor Tiberius, fitted with every device of luxury and extravagance which the fancy of his profligate officials could design. He desired to compose a poem to Caligula, the mighty lion at the amphitheatre, which he would read at the opening of the games. He could not do this amid the cares of state, as he averred, as little as his ministers permitted them to annoy him. Tigellinus had thought to remain. He desired to press his enmity against Fabyan and Lucius, and also to find Myrrha; but Nero desired his company, and his caprice would admit of no denial. Reluctantly the favorite obeyed. The administration of affairs was given to Scavius and the freedman Malito, and, with Poppæa and her women, the courtiers and their courtesans, lute-players, dancers, and the wanton train that made up, like camp followers, the retinue of his court, the Imperial Cæsar retired to the luxurious seclusion of his island.

Thus Lucius, his family, and Fabyan were left to a temporary peace—not peace in an absolute sense, for Tigellinus left orders concerning them. Rome was to be hunted throughout and Volgus and the barbarian found. Confidential agents were intrusted with the work of discovering Myrrha, and reporting immediately should she return to the house of her father. The meetings of the Christians were to be found, and every means taken to apprehend all who attended, and arrangements for the games were to proceed without cessation. Shipments of animals were to be brought in every day, the people were to be kept informed of the progress towards the spectacle which Cæsar was preparing for them, and the gladiators were to train without respite. But the evil genius of this vigorous procedure, as it affected the family of Lucius, was absent from its enforcement; its master could superintend the execution of his commands only from a distance; hence, the hunted ones profited by Nero's sense of inspiration, and Tigellinus chafed helplessly within the limits of his island prison.

Brabano accompanied the court, Poppæa keeping him always in her train, but Berenice remained at the Palatine. To the friendship which had previously existed between herself and the court physician there had been added the significance of a compact. The Jewess had fallen into a state of sullen apathy. She could not make cause against Fabyan with Tigellinus because the favorite had grown beyond her. She might influence him as an incident with her counsel, or he might heed a passing suggestion from her, as upon the night of the banquet, but he would not confide to her his plans or lift her to the dignity of a confederate. She was a woman; he stood now too close to Cæsar, and had grown too great. She had herself large influence with Poppæa, and this she might exert; but since Tigellinus had cause for malice against Fabyan, she felt powerless to pursue any

designs of her own because they might conflict with his.

Few matters which happened at court were insignificant to Brabano. He had seen that the Jewess had conceived a fresh passion for Fabyan, and had watched her closely; he saw now that she had grown angry and was embittered, and, while ignorant of the stormy interview which had made her the tribune's enemy, he was not ignorant of her state of mind. He suspected her despair, and knew how much her rage might endanger them all. Hence he hastened to avert the peril, acting with his accustomed skill. The key to her character was her inordinate vanity, and since Fabyan had repelled her advances he grew deferential to her himself. His power was as magic over those whom he desired to influence, and Berenice responded with all the ardor of her blood and temper. Fabyan was not forgiven, but when the court physician informed her that his plans looked to a friendship with the Amici she smothered her deep resentment and promised him her aid. The Jewess guessed that all this grew from the influence of Paul, whose power she had herself felt for a period during their association, but for the cause she cared nothing. It was sufficient that Brabano was arrested by her beauty, and sought her for an ally in some plot that looked to his advancement. The physician was not precipitate, and now that he had conquered her, he saw in this wilful and beautiful woman an instrument of effective strength. The Jewess knew on her part the extent of the power of the physician with the Empress. This knowledge brought neither surprise nor condemnation to her mind, but she exulted the more. She knew Poppæa thoroughly, and she knew as well the surroundings in which they both moved. The court of Nero was a carnival of every vice, clothed in purple and garlanded with flowers. The white Faustina, the black Mytolla, the yellow Kyros,

with Circassian, Nubian, and Greek were atoms of the sixteen hundred persons who made up the palace following. Poppæa cared nothing for the uncertain Cæsar, tottering now upon uncertain limbs and daily growing watery in the eyes. She smiled when his vagrant fancy rested upon a Crispinella, who, outraging even the vile decorum of the Palatine, and dressed as a vestal, had danced with Paris in a number of Lucan's lewd play, "The Bacchanalia." No depravity of human conduct was wanting at the palace. While Poppæa's was still the supreme influence with Nero, she did not wield it alone, nor with Tigellinus. There was the Greek girl for whom he yet retained a semblance of regard, and he permitted no restrictions upon any license suggested by either his vile associates or his own decaying mind. He was indifferent to the conduct of his Empress when it did not interfere with his own pleasures, and her influence over him lay largely in her light reproaches, stimulated only to keep his vanity alive. Those about him had their own lives so full of intrigue and debauchery that they regarded as commonplace the derelictions of others. Poppæa was good-tempered and of a friendly hand, especially set in the interest of Tigellinus. This policy kept strong her sway, and her conduct was not scrutinized by the men of the palace; the women had small reason to resent it.

All this made doubly strong the power of Brabano, aiding him to suppress the indignant and slighted fancy of the Jewess. And Berenice had regarded Fabyan's conduct as natural, however much it angered her; she was herself inconstant. Having known nothing but vice during all her life, treachery of the heart could afflict only those upon whom it fell. She could hate Fabyan and despise Myrrha, but she could not do so to her own disparagement, and Brabano was not a friend to be scorned or lost. She was content, therefore, to declare

a truce, unwilling, in fact, that her new admirer should know of her baffled passion, and anxious only that Fabyan should not reveal it. Nor was Brabano a man to be easily deceived. She had long looked towards his cool dignity and superb bearing with the eager fancy of a coquette. To bring him at last to her feet was a victory worth preserving. As she grew cautious her duplicity resumed its sway. The rôle was not so difficult, in spite of her recent fury, in the light of what had passed. She had been friendly to Paul during their recent association, and had promised Fabyan to assist him at the court. And she had meant to keep this faith. While the saving words, "Go, and sin no more," had not been spoken to her, she had felt for the Apostle a reverence which none denied him, and could, therefore, fall readily into any plan which Brabano might have for his welfare.

Brabano was not deluded, but he was, as ever, discreet. He did not seek to learn how intimate had been her relations with Fabyan, nor tell her anything of Myrrha. He did not think that Fabyan would too freely make known his heart's secret to a woman with whom he had held an association in the past. He was content to let events work out their natural sequence, guiding them as occasion arose, by his master-hand.

He therefore arranged that Berenice should remain in Rome. The pretext was an easy one. She pleaded an indisposition which travelling would augment, and Brabano advised the Empress that the plea was good. But Poppæa, ever suspecting duplicity, although never her calm counsellor, sought a different reason. She learned it from Faustina, who had heard that Malito had conceived a sudden passion for the Jewess, of which she was well informed. This was a situation with which the Empress could sympathize, so Berenice had leave to stay.

Brabano had many agents in Rome and about the palace, but he trusted them only so far as circumstances might warrant. He was assured now of the fidelity of Berenice, and of her intelligence he was also certain. He did not know how long Nero designed to stay at Capreæ, or what the officers of Tigellinus might do in Rome. He had determined to find means to return to the capital if he could procure leave, and a trusty slave was placed at the call of Berenice that she might send any news to the island which it might interest him to know.

To Lucius and his anxious family the departure of the tyrant offered a glad relief, but Fabyan did not permit them to relax their vigilance. They felt it safe to visit Myrrha in her retreat, but exercised the utmost caution. Fulvia and Valentina begged that she now be permitted to return home, protesting tearfully when told that it was unsafe. Volgus, as Fabyan had designed, took up his abode at a point beyond the Tiber, and ventured to the house in the Subura only after nightfall. Throughout the day Paul's shop was open, but neither the ex-gladiator nor Ethelred was now seen there, and Zekiah even came to it but warily. The times had grown more perilous and Christians were arrested daily. Lucius knew the issue he had made with Nero, and as the days went by he was troubled. He held numerous and anxious conferences with Fabyan; their safety lay in some successful movement which could rid the empire of the youthful tyrant, and he was ready to act whenever Brabano should put him in communication with the men of his conspiracy. Nero had reached a bad eminence, above which there seemed no greater height. Lucius, in part, knew the record of his crimes. It was Rome, servile and submissive, that condoned them. There were eighty murders to his account, and the city populace, a majority composed of the scum of all countries, had

laughed at each successive villany. The senate was both cowardly and ashamed, and the report of each atrocity by prætor, tribune, or centurion plunged it deeper in base subjection. Its members seemed mad with terror, each for his household, trembling in fear of a visit from the prætorian guard. The last of the Cæsars, even though a monster, was to be endured in preference to a civil war brought about by contending aspirants for the throne, and the public, brutalized though it was, reckoned Cæsar, living, a choice to the community torn with strife. Among the senators were left a few, however, with the courage of revolt, and upon these Lucius and Fabyan relied. Doubtless, among them were the confederates of Piso and Brabano. Lucius knew that his wealth and strength were all that stayed the tyrant's hand, and he further knew that his relief was not for long.

In his grief and perplexity he was surprised to find himself seeking constant counsel of Paul. The Apostle amazed, confounded, and impressed him. With Fulvia he met him often at night at the home of Gabrial, conversing with him during the interval preceding his departure to attend his gatherings beyond the Tiber. Paul allowed nothing to interrupt these meetings, although they were held secretly and were attended with danger. Often Lucius would return to his home and talk with Fulvia until dawn about the wonders of which they heard from the Apostle. They were comforted by a mutual interest which his words inspired, and by a hope which took them beyond their present troubles and promised something for the future. Fabyan was impressed also, as was Valentina; at this they rejoiced. Ethelred had caught the spirit which prevailed with the simple people among whom Myrrha had found refuge, and all were tending towards a certain destiny which, portend what it might, they were glad to welcome. Lu-

cius had listened, disputed, and been convinced; Fulvia, with Valentina, had believed. Myrrha had gone to the faith as though she had known it always, and Fabyan, although silent, was respectful, reverent, and thoughtful. The leaven was working, and the Apostle noted it with the deep satisfaction of one who loved those whom he now convinced. His demeanor was joyous and self-confident, and a happy buoyancy took the place of his previous reserve. He delighted in the labor of his hands, and his soul was exalted. As the danger increased his spirits rose, and though he was moved by a profound sympathy for those who went daily to the dungeons of the Mamertine, he knew that he was soon to join them and that his feet trod close upon the time of his reward. The presence of his new friends afforded him a delight which he had never before known, and Myrrha and Ethelred were a constant joy. He did not know the cause of the sympathy which poured out and over them from his full heart, but he saw that his affection was returned, and it illumined his whole being. To Ethelred he spoke of John Mark, his wanderings, the missions, and his services, of the dangers he had endured and the faith that had sustained him, of the efficacy of his prayers, and the constant and supporting presence of the Master; with tenderness he spoke also of Timothy. To Myrrha he spoke of Miriam. She did not understand the purport of his words, except that he spoke of a woman whom he had loved, and who was a part of his youth. With her own heart full of Fabyan she could listen in sympathy to a story like that, and her large eyes bent upon him and, stirring him so strangely, choked his speech. In his shop below he carried a memory of her through the day, and nightly he blessed her in his prayers. A great light seemed to be shining upon the end of his pilgrimage, as it had shone upon him on the great day of his conversion.

XXIII

PETER

ROME, like the fabled Argus, was sleepless. Its days were given to the restless barter that sustained its life and fed it with the luxuries of the world, and its nights were given to revelry and pleasure. Time was impotent to subdue its busy millions. The heights of the Janiculum ridge forever heard the muffled roar, dying faint at times, but always audible; and when the night shut out the sight of its teeming numbers the sky above gleamed with lights. But even this great and invincible creature had its periods of torpor; it struggled less at the sullen and gaping hour which followed midnight, and within its confines were arteries where its blood was sluggish and its pulse beat fitfully.

At such a place was the foreign burial-ground beyond the Tiber, west of the Septiminian Way and north of the Janiculum bridge. The line of city had grown beyond it, extending to points even northwest of the Vatican hill, but at this spot there was a section of broken country undisturbed.

Here the Jews laid away their dead, decorating the place with solemn tenderness, and sheltering it by high walls from the profane gaze of the Gentiles. Here was a spot where the children of Judea were safe, where persecution ceased and Rome lowered her sword; the faggot and torch were of no avail, and the chains that bound were the gentle bonds of sleep. The patrician Roman burned and urned his dead, preserving the loved

ashes upon the family altar; the official Roman burned the public dead and gave their remnants to the winds. Only the Jew consigned his mortal person to the dust, and a people who preferred such consecration to the worms were avoided with a shudder and allowed to pursue their unwholesome way in peace. Hence, under the shades of this final abiding place, behind the drooping foliage and beyond its tombs, there were retreats which no prying Gentile gaze had ever penetrated.

It was here that the early Christian made his church and went to worship. To him the place was eminently fit; the presence of the dead sanctified it, and the hovering spirits seemed to breathe upon him a benediction.

It was the hour of greatest silence, when the noise from the giant beyond the Tiber was stertorous and rattled in its throat, when the fewest lights were seen along the river, and the sentinels stood behind their shields. There was a moon in the heavens to bless the scene, as splendid as the great cupola upon the Palatine, and it crowned with a flood of light the top of the Vatican hill. Its rays penetrated even amid the walls of the secluded cemetery, and found a grove in which a few faithful worshippers were assembled. They knew the peril in which they stood; they did not dare it by pride and effrontery, but they would not have feared to cry aloud the name of Christ in the presence of Cæsar himself as they did thereafter in the presence of death.

It was a grassy plot, at the base of a precipitous bluff, backed by a row of encircling cedars. An altar was raised against the face of the cliff; upon it the beams of the moon fell directly, lighting it up almost as by day. All about a group of men and women stood waiting. The watcher at the gate finally announced the coming of others, and a man, with the appearance of authority, came through the aisle of trees and stood among them. It was Paul, and with him were Lucius, Fulvia, Valen-

tina, and Myrrha, with her friends from the house in the Subura. Fabyan, Gabrial, Ethelred, and Volgus were all present, Fabyan looking with some curiosity upon the scene, and noting how, as Paul stopped to greet those whom he knew in the circle gathered about the altar, they strove to kiss his hands and reverently touch his garments. Many of the figures were not to be recognized, scarcely more than shadows against the fringe of trees, but soon lights were guardedly hung in the branches to assist the rays of the moon, and a bronze lamp was placed upon the altar. Then mats were laid upon the grass for those who were old and decrepit.

Fabyan observed how much Paul was a leader. He took his place at once upon the slightly raised eminence, and, lifting his hand, prayed softly, and, upon ceasing, began in his deep voice the notes of a strain of music. It was known to the others, for they took it up, first the women and then the men, and finally the voices of children, awakened from their slumbers amid the wraps to which their parents had consigned them. The sweet murmur rose and fell gently upon the air, rich with a strange meaning. The cliff gave back an echo as though unseen voices had joined the chorus. The soldier caught the inspiration from Myrrha's rapt eyes, and when her sweet voice fell into the rhythm he strove to join it himself, but stopped as though he profaned the melody. They ceased, but the strain lingered in the air; it tremulously rose like a mist along the beams of the moon, which were sapphire bars among the green cedars, and Myrrha felt that God's angels were there, and she seemed to hear the dying reverberations of invisible harp-strings.

To this ecstasy the Apostle spoke, but his words were few. He enjoined upon them renewed courage, constant faith, and a reliance in their time of trial upon a power that never failed. It was his delight, as he told

them, to speak always to the brethren for his Master's cause, but there was another present before whom he was worthy only in God's sight, but who was brother to all in Christ Jesus, the Lord.

He descended from the altar and went among the little group at his right, and then assisted to his place the uncertain steps of a man whose feet moved carefully up the stone blocks. His hand rested for support upon the shoulder of the Apostle, and then his figure was reared, clear cut, sharp, and intense, before them. The heart of Fabyan thrilled with an awe not understood, and his friends were as deeply moved. The man's proportions were of gentle majesty, with an outline to delight the craft that the deftest Greek had given to the statues in the palaces of the adjacent city. A beard like snow fell upon his long, gray habit, and locks like a silver mist wreathed his neck. His head was high and mighty, a broad and noble crown of white, and his brow splendid above eyes that gleamed in the moonlight. The face was a human face, but God had moulded it anew; the fire of early tempests had seamed it, but the scars had been touched with a softness that breathed in a suggestion, like a lesson, a story of purity and love. The venerable figure was colossal in something not to be named. It was Peter, the disciple of Christ. The graves about were as mouths to witness his words. He was eloquent in the story which he had told so often and which grew sweeter in the telling—the nativity, the life as of heaven lived on earth, and the death that was for men; the sacrifice that saved souls past, present, and for all time to come, that gave existence a new purpose and death a new meaning; a creed, spoken in the air breathed by the despot of the Palatine, that made his evil as naught, and was efficient to save even his inhuman soul. What mattered the dungeons of the Mamertine and the beasts of the Maximus? Here was eternal life!

And as he, the man who had been blessed by the Saviour's smile and had held his sacred form in death, spoke in the moonlight the message of the cross, Fabyan knew that behind the words of promise was the voice of God.

Humbly he knelt with the others, reverently he bowed his head before the blessing that fell from the uplifted hands, and when he arose he knew that with those about him he had come out of the past as from a forest of shadows and was born again.

There was no confession of faith, nor any further ceremony; the meeting prepared to disperse. Fabyan went, with the others, closer to the altar, where several of the elders were conversing with the Apostle and with Peter. It was the custom of those present to go almost immediately home, following the cessation of the exercises, for it was late, and men and women sacrificed the precious hours for slumber when the days were full of labor, and with some the toil was hard. But to-night they desired to talk about the persecutions, and learn from one another of those who had been taken into custody. Paul knew of these, keeping fully informed as to each arrest, and praying nightly for them at the meetings. Their fate was uncertain, but the soldiers at the prisons did not hesitate to say that they were to be put to death during the games. They were scarcely accorded a hearing, and the judges decreed a trial unnecessary. The merits or impropriety of the Christian creed were not investigated or discussed. Under the orders of Nero the single issue was their belief in Christus, and this none of them denied. The men went to the dungeons with calm courage, soothing and comforting the more timid women. The children were scarcely conscious of the peril which assailed them, as they, too, were taken with their parents, but, sustained by the fortitude that remained a wonder to their captors, often smiled as the grated doors were closed behind them.

The women drew closer to the group at the altar, seeking to get a nearer view of the great disciple, and Fabyan found opportunity for a word with Lucius.

"'Tis a comfort," he said; "this new faith which has taken such a hold upon my heart. It supplies me with a singular courage, one which I have not heretofore possessed. Look at Valentina and at Myrrha — how their eyes shine and their lovely faces glow! And when I see how nobly these poor creatures go to the fate which we know awaits them, it shames the lack of patience with which I chafe under the troubles which have come upon us."

"So says my Fulvia—her very words almost," replied Lucius. "Like thee, I am finding a new strength and mine eyes are opening."

"I have word from Brabano," said Fabyan. "As thou knowest, he went away with the court to Capreæ, but before his departure he arranged to let me hear from him. I saw his slave to-day. Tigellinus is restless away from Rome, and hath news sent him daily from the Palatine; its nature, or whether it relates to us, I cannot say. Doubtless he hath other matters. Nero is deep in his fancies, and sits by the hour upon a bluff above the sea. He will not return until his muse is satisfied, and until then Tigellinus is a prisoner."

"And Brabano—what of him?"

"He is here, in Rome, but his stay must be brief. Cæsar desires him always near, and Poppæa is frightened into an indigestion whenever he is absent."

"Hast seen him?"

"No, but I shall upon the morrow. I went to the Palatine, but he was not there. If word of our disfavor hath been spoken about the court I saw no signs of it. The guard was respectful, and the palace slaves as usual."

A shriek now rang out from a portion of the throng,

and they turned to see a swaying group support the trembling figure of an old man. Two women were upon their knees, and as they lifted their agonized hands to heaven the tears were streaming down their cheeks. Those about tried vainly to comfort them, but they put aside all help, clinging pitifully to the old man's robe.

"'Tis Eleazer and his daughters," said Zekiah, coming to them, his face expressing his sympathy and grief. "They have learned of the arrest of Joseph, the son, and brother to the girls. Poor lad! He came not home to supper to-night, and, thinking him detained only, they hoped to meet him here. The soldiers took him to the dungeons to-day. They could bear evil for themselves without a murmur—but their brother!"

Paul stepped to the old man's side, and Peter placed his hands upon the heads of the stricken women. There was a magic in the touch, for their sobbings ceased.

"We have many dear to us now in chains," said Paul. "It is time that we go among them. I have learned to-day that we will be permitted to visit our brethren in prison, and to-morrow I shall go. If I find it to be safe, others may go also."

"The danger is great," said Zekiah. "They know thee already for a Christian."

"It matters not," he said. "I shall go to-morrow. Peter will speak at the meetings when I am taken."

Volgus now drew near and touched Fabyan upon the arm. His face, usually expressive of little in its stolidity, now indicated surprise, almost bewilderment. He pointed at two figures, muffled in long robes and hooded heavily, who stood near Peter. Fabyan had observed them himself, but they had called for no special attention in the throng. Now he saw that both were erect, straight, of unusual stature, and one a person of dignity and lofty bearing.

"What is it?" he asked, almost in a whisper, for the

presence of any one there likely to excite apprehension in Volgus was a matter of serious moment.

"'Tis a toga, Lord Fabyan, underneath that cloak of gray, and its braid is a foot deep. There is a silk tunic, also, and a girdle of gold; and the companion is a woman, and wears jewels."

"I will speak to Paul, and warn the others," said Fabyan, hastily. "Is the meeting betrayed, think you? Should the soldiers come now they would reap a sad harvest. What is it?" he continued, and he turned his troubled face to Lucius. "Shall we strike if we are interrupted?"

It was a question he would not have asked an hour ago. Already his sword would have been from beneath his cloak, or his voice, as a tribune, ready to speak in behalf of the assembly.

"Nay, good master," replied Volgus. "It is not the presence of the lady which so much excites surprise; she is no stranger to the world, to thee, or the good Apostle; but the man—I will swear truly, being so poor a Christian, which the good Peter forgive—the man hath a face I know, and of which I caught a glimpse. If it is not the great physician of the court, may I go again to the arena with my hands bound behind me!"

Fabyan started with astonishment and looked with incredulity at the freedman.

"Brabano!" he exclaimed.

"Verily! And, see, he comes this way."

The two figures had evidently been watching them, and now they noted the excitement which had accompanied the conversation just taken place. They drew near with slow steps, as though to avoid the attention of the others, and then they threw back their hoods.

Fabyan looked upon them with mingled surprise and dismay. Volgus was right. They were Brabano and Berenice.

The lovely Jewess was calm and self-possessed, and she met his startled glance with eyes that revealed nothing; but the countenance of Brabano was sombre beyond words. His look was dull and heavy, with an apparent anxiety. Fabyan's first thought was that he had met with some defeat or news of disaster, and he again searched Berenice earnestly with his eyes, to see if her hostility to himself might be the cause. But the Jewess was impassive and impenetrable, serenely greeting Fulvia and her companions, as though her relationship to all the Amici was as friendly as before. But Brabano was ill at ease, and though he strove to maintain his composure his effort was vain; his poise, his habitual and lofty self-assurance, were gone. A weight seemed to have fallen upon him and crushed out the dauntless vigor and that high and haughty serenity that looked always at fate with the mien of a conqueror. He seemed shrunken at the shoulders, and his glance was furtive, turning ever and anon in the direction of the Apostle Peter. He did not speak in answer to the astonished greeting of Fabyan, or the scarcely less surprised ejaculation of Lucius, but Berenice replied immediately.

"I saw thee," she said, "and noted that the household of the Amici were all present. A strange place for a family of such dignity," and her lip curled for an instant, and then the mocking expression was lost; "but I am here myself. Perhaps thy slaves, too, are among the drooping figures about the trees. What was the matter with the poor man whose daughters were crying at his feet? Something about his son, was it not? I think I heard them say so."

She did not wait for a reply, but continued to speak.

"Our Brabano knew of my association with the good Paul, and, having met him also, desired to attend one of these secret meetings. I was myself full of curiosity. Dost think, my lord Fabyan, that I have renewed to-

night the interest I felt from the very first? Those were pleasant days, good friend, when we journeyed home together. Ah, well! we cannot expect a man to keep such things in mind."

She looked, in the moonlight, at Myrrha.

"Pleasant, indeed," he responded, coldly. "I am glad thou art here to-night."

She gave a sigh of hypocrisy.

"I could not get the words of our dear Paul from my mind," she said. "I have longed to have him counsel me again, and tell me if I am to have the saving grace of which he spoke."

"The grace of God is promised to all who believe," said Lucius. "So it was said to-night."

"I heard it, but then, thou seest, I have heard so much." She glanced at Fabyan, slyly. "The people are looking at us with wondering eyes."

"Is it not glorious!" cried Valentina. "The sweet words—the rock—this quiet spot, and the splendid moon! What a man was that beautiful Peter!"

"Yes," said Berenice. "And who was he that stood near thee in the moonlight—the youth with the feather who is looking at us now? He hath a claim to beauty, also, for a finer man I have never seen at court."

"'Tis a prince, who is a Briton," answered Myrrha, as Valentina was silent. "His name is Ethelred."

"Summon him," said Berenice, imperiously, to Fabyan. "Bid him hither."

"He comes by instinct," replied Fabyan, his assurance returning, observing that Ethelred was approaching. "He is here."

The bold eyes of Berenice surveyed the Briton with a look of such admiration as to make the cheeks of Valentina flush, and Fabyan smiled with something of his old humor. He did not trust Berenice, but he trusted Bra-

bano, and he guessed the meaning of the armistice she extended to him.

Brabano stood in silence as this conversation progressed. His gloom continued, and he seemed indifferent to the impression which his presence evoked. Now, however, he summoned something of his usual bearing and addressed Lucius.

"I came from Capreæ by special relay to-day," he said. "To-morrow I trust to see thee at thy house. Shall I come in the afternoon? And thou, my Fabyan," he continued, turning to the tribune, "wilt thou be present?"

"Truly," answered the young man, still noting his changed manner, and wondering what it might portend.

"And this Peter, the man who spoke last, have him come also. See our good Paul, my Fabyan, and arrange for it. I shall not rest until I have spoken with him."

His voice was passionate now and his eyes troubled.

"Wilt thou not see him to-night?" asked Fabyan, kindly, observing his uneasiness, and seeking in some manner to aid him.

"Nay, not to-night," and Brabano hesitated. "No, it is late; to-morrow, if he will."

Fabyan hesitated also.

"He will wonder at thy presence, my Brabano, and a knowledge of it will disturb these poor people. I am not fearful that harm to them will come of it," and he looked meaningly at Berenice, to indicate to her that he was not reassured, "but the time is full of peril for them."

"Assure them of the truth," replied the physician. "I learned of this place through a freedman whom Tigellinus had set to spy upon thee. The man found the shop of Paul in the Subura, and, two nights since, followed him here. The spy is in my pay and will report only

such things as I permit. It is so with the man set to spy upon Lucius."

Fabyan and his uncle exchanged glances.

"The Princess Berenice came with me when she learned that I desired to attend this meeting. Whether or not my coming was for good remains with the future. We will go now, lest we frighten the people further. We have litter bearers at a safe distance, but they will not learn of this spot. Good peace to thee!"

They took their departure, drawing their hoods about their faces. Fabyan caught another glance from the dark eyes of Berenice, but he did not know its import. He prayed for a permanent truce with her, but he was uncertain. He went to tell Paul of Brabano's request.

XXIV

BRABANO'S CONVERSION

ON the afternoon of the following day Brabano came promptly to the home of Lucius. He had sent a litter with bearers to the shop in the Subura to bring Peter to the Pincius, but the disciple had dismissed it with a smile. He preferred to walk, despite the distance. In all his long life no man had borne either his person or his burdens, so, leaning upon his staff, and in company with Paul, he came to the Pincius on foot. They arrived there shortly after Brabano, and found Fulvia, with her slaves about her, awaiting them in the vestibule. Greeting them cordially, she led the way to the room where the physician sat with Lucius and Fabyan. The three men arose as they entered, and remained reverently standing until both were seated, and then Brabano came immediately to the matters within his mind.

"I have been strangely troubled, good Paul," he said, "since the discourse of last evening. In truth, the matter troubled me before. As thou knowest, I have talked with thee touching the new creed which thou professest, and likewise I have talked with the Princess Berenice. It was because of this lady that I came last night to the meeting. She hath been curious to attend, and when the spy brought me word that these gatherings were held nightly at the cemetery beyond the Tiber, I told her of it, and she begged that we go. The words which I heard from the good Peter disturbed me; following them, the Lady Berenice hath further impressed

me, telling me more fully than I have heard heretofore of those matters which she learned of thee upon the ship journeying from Cæsarea. She hath not realized their import as have I. Hence, I desired to see Peter, to talk with you both about this new religion, that I may set my mind at rest. Surely, I shall find such fallacies in your teachings that they will disturb my peace no more."

"In truth, my lord Brabano," said Paul, in reply, "thou dost not differ greatly from our noble Lucius, nor from any with whom I have talked since my labor begun. Thou wilt find no fallacy, but thou wilt find peace in what I have to say. That it hath disturbed thee, I am glad; that it will bless thee, I am sure."

"The grace of God be with thee!" said Peter, lifting his hand solemnly, "now, henceforth, and forevermore!"

Brabano trembled under his words. He looked steadily into the venerable face, and his eyes grew moist.

"I know not what is the feeling that comes over me," he said. "It is a strange matter, and I have thought myself to be ill. But I have no bodily infirmity, and I know that the trouble is of the mind—that it cometh from the words which were spoken last night, the memory of which hath made slumber impossible. I have rested not since I heard thee."

"Take comfort," said Peter. "Thou wilt rest forever in consequence."

Brabano let his head fall slowly, his hands crossed upon his breast; Lucius and Fabyan looked at him with deep emotion as they observed how he was moved. So stern and calm and high was his habitual composure that they marvelled to see him trembling like a child. They sat and listened in awe and wonder.

"'Tis a strange change in me," he said. "I scarcely know myself. I find myself with new thoughts, and new

purposes flit across my mind. They run in old channels from force of habit, but their nature disturbs me."

"How?" asked the Apostle.

"They interfere," replied the proud man, his brow troubled.

"They thwart thy previous hopes?" questioned the Apostle.

"Truly," and Brabano turned his eyes upon the serious face. "I seek in vain a compromise with myself and conscience, but my mind is reluctant; it forbids."

Paul smiled.

"What art thou willing to forego?"

"Nothing!" exclaimed Brabano, passionately. "'Tis a resentment that I feel against thee—thy creed—myself; a resentment that is rebuked by my new spirit, making void my purposes and plans. I find no relief, and hence I sought thee, with Peter."

"Replace them with new purposes and better plans," said Paul, earnestly. "'Tis not ambition, but happiness, that the heart craves—a happiness not of earth. Serve God."

"How?" The question expressed the suspense and feeling of the physician's strong will.

"By living merely in the knowledge of His word. What is ambition, without hope hereafter? What is carnal happiness on earth?"

"Answer thou," said Brabano, almost sullenly. "Thou art the teacher."

"Nay," replied the Apostle, gently; "Christ is the teacher. Ambition halts inevitably at the grave, and human happiness is fleeting. 'Tis the happiness of the soul that endures and that sees something beyond."

"I have felt it almost from the beginning," said Brabano, after a pause. "I felt it when the first knowledge of this teaching came to my ears. I pondered upon it

by force of necessity, not will. I put it by, but the effort was futile. I knew it to be true."

"Go on," said Paul.

"There is no more. I am humbled—almost undone."

"Thou art lifted up and exalted," said the Apostle. "The time of thy redemption is at hand."

"Ay," replied Brabano, slowly. "Further rebellion is useless. "The weight must be lifted from my heart. Last night I heard anew the story of thy Master's birth, His life and death; I heard thy words as to His works while living, and the precepts that He taught. 'Blessed are the meek—blessed are the poor in spirit,' and, most wonderful of all, 'Love thine enemies, and do good to those who despitefully use thee.' Whence cometh such counsel in these days of Rome, amid the license and bloodshed of the world? Such doctrines elsewhere have I heard not before, nor have I thought them. He hath lifted up the lowly and rebuked the great, and in the voice of charity he hath said to the fallen, 'Go ye, and sin no more.' Lord, I believe! Help Thou my unbelief!"

He sank upon his knees, his rich robe trailing behind him, his eyes raised humbly to heaven. Paul stood looking at him with eyes aglow, while Peter, with bowed head, was moving his lips in prayer.

Fabyan put out his hand and clasped that of his uncle; united in a touch of sympathy, they rejoiced in this new evidence of the saving grace that they, with the proud man now bowed in their presence, confessed and acknowledged.

"Will my sins be forgiven me?" asked Brabano. "Am I, who have been filled with bitterness and pride, with vainglory and a boundless ambition, worthy to follow the humble Nazarene, who was the Son of the living God?"

"'Though thy sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white

as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool!'" said the disciple. "So said the Master."

"Thou wilt baptize me in the faith?" asked Brabano.

"And wilt thou me?" asked Lucius, and Fabyan repeated the words.

"Since thou believest in the holy name of Jesus, I will."

Brabano arose from his knees and seated himself upon the couch from which he had slipped to the floor. His features were placid, and he had resumed his composure; but his face bore now a look which Lucius and Fabyan had never seen there before.

"It is matter of moment to others than myself," he said, finally, his words slow and measured. "Last night I realized that I was of those who had been converted to the faith, although I fought against it. To-day I am blessed in a perfect knowledge of a change of heart, and am content. I heard thy words as caught from the Master, 'What profiteth it a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?' But I am physician to one who is wholly wicked; I live in an atmosphere in which good thoughts fester. What now am I to do? It is not a question I would put to thee, dear Paul; 'tis one that I might assume to answer for myself, but that I am authorized to put it to Peter, who is responsible in chief for my conversion. I am Peter's man, for he hath made me. What now am I to do?"

The disciple smiled. His countenance was like the sun.

"Thou art Christ's man," he said. "'Tis His bidding thou must do. Ask of Him."

"It is enough," said Brabano. "I accept my fate. God be with us all!"

"He is," replied Peter. "'Tis a pleasure—this service to which we are devoted. It hath not been the joy of all to see the Master as He looked, to hear His blessed

voice and know the deep consciousness of His presence; but Paul hath felt that presence, and until Jesus comes again so may all the children of men. There is no life outside of Him. There cannot be. How infinitely do we love ourselves when we love our enemies; how immeasurable is the scope of that life that loves God! Thou wert born but recently, and thou wilt die soon; that thou knowest. It was countless years to the beginning before thy birth, and time will be eternal following thy death, and thy little life between these periods is scarce a breath; it is valueless unsaved. If in this life only we have hope, we are of all men the most miserable, Paul hath said it, and it is true. It is beyond this life that life truly begins, and that Christ hath said. What are thy pride, vainglory, and ambition worth to thee beside such a promise? Ah, man! blessed art thou—blessed are all who are henceforth to hear the word! What must thou do, dost thou ask? Take up thy burden and follow me."

All the resolution and strength returned to Brabano's features, and he was again the masterful personage whom they had first known. He drew his toga about his shoulders, and, rising, steadily paced up and down the marble floor of the chamber.

Lucius called to Fulvia, who had the slaves bring bread and wine, with which they refreshed themselves. Brabano did not eat, nor did they disturb him. Valentina came to greet the visitors, with Ethelred and Volgus, who had ventured to the home of Lucius on the night before, to see his intimates among the freedmen. As they entered Brabano paused in his walk from time to time to nod to them a greeting, and when all were gone but the five who had been together he stopped beside his friend of old, and laid his hand upon his shoulder.

"Well, my Lucius," he said, his brow serene. "There are to be times of trial before us which we must meet

in a new mode. Our good friends have sore disturbed our plans, but we are to thank them, notwithstanding. Nero is not to fall at our instance, and the fate of his empire rests with God, not us."

"May we not be His instruments?" cried Fabyan, starting to his feet.

Brabano smiled.

"'Tis a question I asked myself during all of last night. How readily temptation finds a word for the tongue!"

"Thou art right," said Paul. "God seeks His own instruments. When He calls thee thou wilt know it."

"But Myrrha," cried Fabyan, "and this beloved household—are we not to strike a blow in their behalf? Must we stand tamely by and see our kindred destroyed, and must I behold my beloved sacrificed to a fate which is worse than death?"

"Ask her as to thy course," said Paul. "Question thy Myrrha, and hear the answer she will give thee."

"I shall not!" cried Fabyan. "'Tis upon me that she relies. This monster of Rome is all powerful, and his creature, Tigellinus, is vile beyond words. My course of safety lay through Brabano's aid, and now I must seek for other means. Both Nero and his minion are the foes of God, and likewise of all our brethren—they are foes of the faith, and surely in striking them down we do humanity a service!"

Brabano smiled again.

"Thou art not quite ripe for martyrdom, it seems," he said. "There can be no mistake as to the Christian's duty, as it hath been revealed to us; it calls for absolute surrender. When I surrendered my ambitions I surrendered earthly hope. Paul hath told us to seek direction in prayer."

"And is Christianity a surrender of all earthly hope?" asked Fabyan.

"Nay," answered Paul. "God hath His instruments, and directs them as He chooseth. Christianity is the beginning of earthly hope; but it is a surrender to God's will, with a reliance upon Him alone for guidance; take counsel of Him in prayer, and He will answer thee."

"But Myrrha—my beloved—what of her?" cried Fabyan, in despair.

"'Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him,'" murmured the Apostle.

"Ay—me! Though He slay *me*, truly," cried Fabyan, beating his breast with his hand; "I will cheerfully go to any fate; but Myrrha—I would die for her!"

"Christ died for her," said Peter, "no less than for thee. Dost thou think He will desert her, or any who put their trust in Him?"

"I do not think it, yet I am torn with conflicting emotions," cried the soldier. "There is no doubt as to the designs of the tyrant—common prudence would suggest some means of safety. Even Paul counselled the placing of Myrrha with the family of Gabrial when, with the power of Christ to save her, she could have been left in the open day within sight of either Cæsar or Tigellinus. I see a comfort in this faith, and know the joy of hope; but when faith sickens and hope is dimmed, of what avail is that God who fails us at a crisis, and who, being all powerful, withholds His strength when we most need it?"

"I spoke the words myself, last night," said Brabano; "it is a question that will be asked by countless lips until our Master comes again. I answered it to my own purpose, but mine is a lonely and a selfish soul. What of this noble heart, now torn and bleeding? Speak to it, Paul, or thou, Peter, who hadst the answer from the Christ Himself."

"'Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him,'" murmured Paul again.

"'Tis in the crisis that God speaks—in the hour of

death and at the day of judgment," answered Peter. "How much do I know it—how much do all know it who have followed in His footsteps! How often have I fainted on the way, and how strong was the hand put forth to sustain me! How often hath Paul tasted of the bitterness of death, when only the spirit of God was present to console him! If we have not that, we have nothing. Christ came to save; it was His purpose and His mission, and do thou but trust Him and in the hour of thy greatest tribulation thou wilt find Him near thee."

"Do I sin, and have I blasphemed?" asked Fabyan, impressed by the manner of the disciple.

"God will pardon thee; He pardons us all," replied Peter. "Did not the Master, when stretched upon the cross, when torn and mangled, His mortal body awake, cry in His agony, 'My God! My God! Why hast Thou forsaken me?' And will He not find pity for thee when thou art agonized also? Be comforted. Even now our brethren languish in prison, before they go to meet a trial that is mingled of night and madness; yet thou wilt see them rejoice in pain and triumph in affliction; thou wilt see them rise above all mortal terror to go with outstretched arms to the angels that await them. Death hath no victory and life no afflictions since the word of Christ is true. These limbs are old and shake feebly under me; my heart is poor and stricken, and clings fondly to the loving wife and son I have with me beyond the Tiber; danger threatens them no less than thy Myrrha, and myself no less than thee; yet I am strong in Christ Jesus, who is the Lord, to whom I commit thee, myself, my loved ones, and all the children of men!"

"Art answered, my Fabyan?" asked Brabano. "Is it not a new vista that is opened before us, more beautiful than the gardens of the Palatine? Gird thy spirit afresh,

and set thy wits at work along the gentler lines of patience and forbearance. We leave the tyrant to the will of God, setting up no more our own vain plans of vengeance and ambition. I return to my duties with a new conscience, to do whatever work is set to my hand. How is it with thee, Lucius?"

"It is so with me," replied Lucius, waving his arm around him. "My house, and all that I have and love, I commit to the faith which I acknowledge."

"Thou canst be of service," said Fabyan to Brabano. "Nero, under proper influence, may stay away from Rome for many days, and Poppæa—"

He was interrupted by a quick and sudden movement on the part of the physician. His face was convulsed, and his hand for an instant clutched at his throat as though his breath came short.

"What is it?" asked Fabyan, in surprise.

"Go on," said Brabano, recovering his composure, his face now gloomy. "What of Poppæa?"

"She might induce Nero to remain away; her health might better call for the air of Capreæ, and the tyrant's absence is safety to us and to our brethren."

"All are safe until the games," said the physician.

"Those not yet taken may be saved thereafter if they be not taken now," said Fabyan.

"Hast any plans?"

"I have no plans as yet; I must make them anew," replied Fabyan. "But I shall not tamely submit to see my kindred destroyed and my Myrrha lost. I see my duty now. I am young and vigorous, and God hath given me the spirit of a soldier. I shall bow to His will; I am resigned to what may happen, and shall welcome all that He may send me; but I shall strike for safety to the last, and in His name. I am Nero's foe; I am the foe of Tigellinus, and I shall not spare them. They are God's enemies as well, but if they will repent of their

ways and will cease to persecute the Christians, I will hold my hand and love them, as I am commanded to do. My duty is no less marked than is thine own, and I have Volgus, Ethelred, and a score to follow me. I shall not strike for Myrrha alone, but for my uncle, for Gabrial and his family, and for all who stand in danger of the malignity of Cæsar; and I shall strike without malice, and only for defence."

"Take thy course," said Brabano. "I shall aid thee as lies in my power. Nero will remain for a time at Capreæ. I return there to-morrow. I do not think thou art in present danger, because Tigellinus, being certain of the future, will not spoil any plan with haste. Thou art not alone in his enmity."

Peter and the Apostle arose.

"Peace be with thee!" said the disciple.

"I will see thee upon my return?" asked Brabano.

"Surely," answered Peter. "This is the end of our pilgrimage, and we shall preach the word here until the Master bids us cease."

Brabano again made offer of his litter, but the disciple declined. The household followed him to the vestibule, where he turned and blessed them all, and then, leaning upon the arm of Paul, he took his departure.

XXV

THE GLADIATORS

THE day was bright and the sun warm along the Campus Martius. Its rays penetrated also the narrow streets of the Transtibertine and lighted up the few open spaces which occurred at intervals among the mass of low houses and made breathing spots for the people. The river was full of boats, and a gentle air blew refreshingly from its waters into the heated district. Volgus stepped from a chamber in the dwelling which sheltered him into a small, open area behind it, and stood stretching himself like a great mammoth in the sun. The breath of freedom was intoxicating. Ethelred had spent the night with him at his lodgings across the Tiber, which were in a house adjoining that occupied by Peter and his family. The giant had lamented the changed fortune which compelled him to keep in hiding. He knew his danger, but he missed the free life which had permitted him to go and come at his pleasure. At times he would have dared any peril for a stroll through the narrow streets of the Subura, an afternoon at his favorite wine-shop near the Flaminius Circus, or an evening with his friends at the gladiators' barracks. But he would not add to the embarrassment which his old master, Lucius, already suffered by placing himself in peril. Even though captured and submitted to the torture, he had nothing to reveal; but the fact of the rack caused him little fear, because the stout limbs of a fighting man were never so destroyed. He would be

thrown in prison until the time of the games, at which he would be sacrificed in some manner likely to afford the most gratification to the spectators. In consequence he kept within doors during the day, venturing out only at night, and then either visiting the house in the Subura or the home of Lucius on the Pincius, to which latter place he went most cautiously, and nearly always in the company of Ethelred.

To-day, however, his patience had worn itself out. Upon the evening before he had met in the Transtibertine an acquaintance who was ignorant of the fact that he was a fugitive from the anger of Tigellinus. This man had told him of his friends at the training-quarters of the gladiators. Volgus was hungry for such news, and listened greedily. His old comrades had missed him; they were wondering at his absence and lamenting it. They, too, were ignorant of the ban under which he rested, and Volgus felt his old impatience struggling within him.

"We will venture it," he said to Ethelred. "The men at the quarters know nothing of our trouble, and if they did, there is not a villain among them to betray us. We can spend an hour there, and stop by at the wine-shop near the Severus Arch. Such a time of recreation will repay all that we have suffered in confinement and fit us for the days to come. There is a spice of danger too, lad, with perhaps a chance for a tussle in the streets. We are good for a centurion's guard in the open. We enjoyed the fight for my sweet mistress, and I long to see thee again in action. I do not wish to slay a Roman soldier at his duty, but these spies of the charioteer who are hunting us down would fare poorly under my fists. If we can go in peace it will be well, but even though we be set upon we can fight our way out. We should be but little closer to capture than we are now."

Ethelred was nothing loath. He was young and fear-

less. The day was inviting, and he, too, longed for freedom.

They did not wholly abandon prudence. From the lodgings of Volgus they made their way through the densely crowded streets of the Transtibertine, threading the alleys which were to the ex-gladiator paths as familiar as the wolf trails to Ethelred through his hunting-grounds in Brittany. Their course was north, and they finally reached the scattered district, through which they turned to the right for the Ælius bridge. Crossing over, they passed through the Campus Martius, enjoying the air and as happy as youths out for a holiday. They were uninterrupted, and reached the towers of the training-quarters without molestation. The tall form of the giant always attracted attention, and the neighborhood, which he had formerly frequented, missed his familiar swagger, but it was evident that none of the many soldiers whom they passed along the ways of the campus had authority to apprehend them. Passing beneath the high arch of the quarters, they entered the large hall. A burst of laughter echoed through it, coming from a smaller chamber on the right; they heard also the clank of tankards, and as Volgus turned his steps in that direction, Ethelred following, Paulo came into the hall and stopped as he saw them.

The face of the young man flushed heavily. He made as though he would have retreated, but having come so far he held his place, and stood looking at Volgus curiously; then his eyes, with furtive glances, sought for Ethelred, whose figure was obstructed by the massive person of his companion.

"Oho, Lord Paulo!" cried Volgus, heartily. "Right glad I am to see thee. Art going?"

"I have finished here," said Paulo, indifferently. "I came to have Cainor commend an instructor for me at the sword, and stayed for a cup with him. Thou art

bold, Volgus, to venture into this precinct after striking down a centurion of Cæsar."

"'Tis for me the safest place in Rome," replied Volgus; "but Cæsar is absent, and I trust he has forgotten me. Thou knowest the Prince Ethelred?"

Paulo flushed again, and his lids fell half over his eyes; then he closed them quickly, as though to conceal a gleam that flamed there. His pause was momentary; he lifted his head with an air of frankness.

"My friend the Briton—most truly. A greeting to thee, sir."

Ethelred returned his salutation with the same freedom of manner, but noted that the hands of the other appeared to be adjusting some difficulty at his girdle, and his eyes did not see the one he extended.

"Hast been to-day to the house of my master, Lucius?" asked Volgus, observing Paulo angrily, as Ethelred dropped his hand and stepped back. "I recall but few mornings," he continued, with a perceptible sneer in his voice, "that did not see thee there early, when my mistress Valentina was kind."

"Ah, yes—thy mistress Myrrha, also. I should have spoken of her in the beginning. She is well, I trust? Whither didst thou bear her?"

"Hast thou not learned of the noble Fulvia?" asked Volgus. "Surely, they have no secrets from so true a friend?"

"Ay—she told me, indeed—but the place I did not recall," stammered the young man, his glance again furtive. "I have not been to the house of Lucius to-day, nor, indeed, for several days. I have been attending with my father at the senate."

The eyes of the ex-gladiator showed a gleam of malice. "Oho!" he exclaimed, with a look at Ethelred; "the noble Lucius is under a ban, and having lost the favor of Cæsar his house is a place of doubt for the Lord

Attilus. The temper of Ahenobarbus is uncertain, and even a senator like thy father, lacking the high station of Lucius, doth well to consider of it."

"Hath he lost favor, and is he under ban?" asked Paulo, quickly. "We have not learned of it; and he carries his person yet outside the tomb. My father hath said that the noble Cæsar might have sent him orders to drink from a certain cup. The Amici are stronger than we thought if Cæsar's centurion can be struck down by them unrebuked."

"I spoke with the recklessness of a freedman," said Volgus, his face clouding. "The noble Lucius is above reproach, and Cæsar holds him as dearly as he holds himself. I was at fault in striking the centurion, and the noble Lucius is blameless. Cæsar, of course, so holds."

"The maids were grieved somewhat, and the noble Fulvia frightened, as I saw," said Paulo, cunningly. "I have not learned of the return of the gentle Myrrha, and the haughty Valentina hath not smiled for days. Indeed, I fancy I am not welcome there at present, but I shall console myself. There be reasons."

Volgus placed a restraining arm across the chest of Ethelred, stepping slightly before him. His face grew dark, but the young patrician, secure in the presence of a freedman and indifferent to a barbarian, as he deemed the Briton, continued:

" 'Tis a question of these Christians. Cæsar hath ordered them apprehended, and the prætor hath promised that they shall be sacrificed at the games. The dens are full of beasts, and each day brings larger shipments. Lucius hath seemingly lost all prudence, and Fulvia is not the same. When last I went there they spoke in a manner that made the house dangerous, and should Cæsar learn of it, following thy action towards his centurion, 'tis the end of the Amici. I said as much to

Valentina, and she was pretty with her tongue; so I went away and shall wait to be called ere I go back."

As he spoke his anger got the better of him. Smarting, evidently, under the memory of what had been said to him, he forgot the Briton, and thought only of the presence of the freedman, whom he, as a patrician, was free to flout at will.

"Say as much to thy mistress," he continued, "repeating it from me; there is a day coming when the fair jade will be glad enough—"

His speech was not finished. Ethelred passed under the arm of Volgus like a flash, and before the astonished Paulo could draw the weapon at his girdle he had knocked him headlong to the floor.

The patrician arose, with bleeding countenance, remembering well the scene with the centurion. He saw it now in his terror, and recalled the bearing of Ethelred before such odds. He shrieked aloud as the Briton pressed upon him again, and, releasing the hilt of his dagger which his hand had clasped instinctively, dodged to avoid another blow that glanced from his swelling face. Running hastily towards the door, he yelled again as a final blow sent him rolling into the street, and picking himself up he ran with all speed through the open forum without.

With heated countenance Ethelred returned to where Volgus stood, laughing heartily at the scene.

"By Jupiter, lad!" he cried. "I must swear by a heathen god in such a place and after such an incident. The good Paul I fear will hold thee to be a doubtful convert. Truly, I am myself weak in grace, which is small wonder, seeing who I was. Thou canst not reform a gladiator, and to Christianize a man who hath fought in the arena is beyond the power of both our good friends. I should have told them so, but for a love I have of them. Salvation is for the patricians,

when they learn of it, barring the knave who has just fled. His father being a man of courage, I marvel to see his son a cur."

"I am glad to put him down," said Ethelred, panting a little from his exertions. "'Tis not a common thing, I trust, for a Roman to speak so of a maid."

"'Tis most uncommon when the maid is such a lady as my mistress," replied Volgus; "but here they come!"

The exclamation was induced by a sight of the gladiators, who now streamed into the hall from all sides. They were attracted by the noise of the incident, and rushed hastily in its direction, to miss nothing that might promise interest. Cainor came first, entering the hall from the chamber on the right.

"What is it?" he asked, stopping in surprise as he saw Volgus. "Hello, old Hercules! I am glad to welcome thee again. Where hast thou been for so long a time?"

"'Twas nothing," replied the giant, his good-natured face aglow. "This young man fell down and hurt himself."

"Was it not thyself?" asked Cainor, with irony. "It was, in truth, thy voice I heard."

"I sat by the window in the wing," said Placidus, "and saw quite plainly a man roll from the door. He turned a somersault in the dust, and must have arisen with his mouth and perhaps his belly full. I saw, too, the length of arm that followed him through the door, and 'twas smaller than thine, my Volgus; and see," he continued, "some one hath fallen here."

He pointed to the white floor where a splash of blood was red in the sand.

"Was it Paulo?" asked Cainor.

"Ay," laughed Volgus. "He sought a bout with our friend the Briton, Prince Ethelred, and caught it cleverly under the ear. 'Tis strange, these foreigners they

hit with the clinched hand as though it held a cestus; and, gods!" and he chuckled loudly, "from the blood that flowed here, it might well be that it did."

"Did he flee?" asked Cainor, in disgust.

"Like a deer," laughed Placidus. "He leaped the chains between the posts of the enclosure like a vaulting Greek, and I'll wager he is running yet. Come, let's have a wine skin."

"It is why we are here," said Volgus, greeting his comrades one by one as they approached. "The sight of this place brings me health. I have been off among the Christians, and have grown so holy that I fear I shall be worthless for any purpose except to feed the lions. What hast thou?"

"Ask it not!" exclaimed Melchus; "Cainor, Hainor, and Virgil may tell thee. Such preparations I have not seen in all my days, and the arena will look like a spot that is strange to even thee. They have thousands of prisoners in the cells, and beasts from the four corners of the empire. There be a group of spotted tigers, with necks so long that when they eat a criminal he is held high above the podium. If the beast should open his jaws the fall would kill the man."

" 'Tis not a tiger; 'tis a leopard," said Placidus. "I have seen them in Africa, and they resemble camels. They are not fierce, and I would meet a dozen in the ring, striking through the long neck at a single blow. But they have beasts enough, and criminals without stint."

"And how many of the family," asked Volgus, his eyes alight.

"Ask Cainor," laughed Virgil. "He will tell thee that never before hath he led so many warriors into the arena. It is my last fight, and I pray the gods to leave the amphitheatre alive. There's a woman I have promised, and, seeing I am ten years in, I should win the wooden foil."

"It will be so, old comrade," said Volgus. "'Twas from thee I won my own freedom, as thou wilt recall, and a better foe I never conquered. Dost remember how I held my hand and stood above thee until I had rallied thy friends on the benches? They forced the Cæsar to give the upturned thumb."

"I was down for good," said the gladiator, laughing, having outlived the terror of the scene. "Though I had the blood from thy chest, I thought myself done. Well, I have seen some others down since then, and the thumbs were down, too. I shall win through this battle, big though it be."

"Where is my Gaul?" asked Volgus, looking about.

"Calcus?" said Hainor. "He was here but a moment since. When we heard the noise, he entered the hall with me."

"Nay," said Virgil. "He came to the inner door, but went away. I saw him pass to the area at back."

"'Tis no matter," said Volgus. "I would drink with the lad before I leave. I shall drink with you all. The Gaul hath rare promise."

"A slippery rat," said Placidus. "I hope the games will trap him."

Calcus now entered, approaching the group from the rear of the hall. His brow was drawn and his manner furtive. He slunk rather than moved among them.

"Ho, lad!" called Volgus. "Art there? I asked for thee when I entered." Calcus said nothing.

"Hast taken to the sword, as I counselled?" continued Volgus. "'Tis a better weapon than the cestus, and leads to twice the honor. Thou hast both the reach and the touch, and what thou mayst lack in muscle thou canst equal in skill."

"Ay," replied the Gaul; "I fight with the sword now, as Cainor will tell thee. I have boxed no more since thou—"

"Since I beat thee, man. Speak it boldly, since 'tis an honor and not a shame. I had both weight and years, which latter counts as to experience. I recall now that it was Paulo who set me on to meet thee. Had he half thy courage — but, come, I am thirsty. Hast wine enough in yonder, Cainor?"

"Wine in plenty," said the captain of the gladiators. "Come, Placidus and Virgil. The others may prepare for the exercises, which I shall call in an hour. We keep to the rule, Volgus, and I do not let these stout muscles grow rusty."

"I warrant not," replied Volgus, following Cainor towards the apartment upon the right, Ethelred accompanying them. "When a gladiator lets duty run slack he steps near the grave."

A long table was in the centre of the room which they entered, and upon it were flasks and cups of metal.

Volgus had scarcely pushed his huge form upon a bench, and possessed himself of a tankard, when the Gaul appeared in the doorway.

Cainor looked up as the Gaul beckoned him.

"A word with thee, captain," he said.

Cainor moved towards him, thinking that some duty relating to his office called for him without, when Ethelred, who had not yet seated himself, and who had passed in front of one of the windows which commanded a view of the front of the building, sprang backward, startling Volgus by the suddenness of his action.

"What is it, lad?" he asked.

"Soldiers," replied Ethelred, "with a substantial German at their head. It is Marcus, the fellow I saw at the palace garden, and he hath a half-score of knaves at his back. They are not the men who waited without at the house of Lucius, but stiff Romans all. We are to meet the veterans, comrade."

"Veterans be it," said Volgus, rising.

"What seek they?" asked Cainor, his face showing his vexation. "I thought the time had passed when soldiers might invade the quarters. None of my fellows have been breaking the city laws, and it's a bad time to disturb us now, when they are getting in order for the games. The tribunes promised to overlook some indiscretions, and if they have come for any of my men I will question the matter until I get word to the prefect."

"The prefect is away with Cæsar," said Volgus, standing at the table and pulling his wits together.

"True," said Cainor, his annoyance visible in his face, "and the old student at the Palatine makes a poor substitute."

The mouth of the waiting Calcus broadened into a grin.

"They are at the back, also," he said. "The quarters are guarded at each entrance, and yet the quarter's men are passing through the lines without challenge. They are awaiting thee, I fancy, captain."

But he looked at Volgus and the Briton.

"We are trapped, old friend," said Ethelred.

Cainor cast at them a look of mingled surprise and inquiry.

"Is it thou?" he asked.

"Ay, 'tis we," replied Volgus, with a deep grunt, expressive at once of his anger and dissatisfaction. "I was fool enough to tempt the prince into the sunlight when I knew the lictors were in search of us, and now we have a fight on. Get away, man," he continued, brushing the Gaul from his path as he swung into the hall, Cainor and Ethelred at his heels. "Some knave who saw us in the streets reported us to the guard."

"The knave is yonder," replied Ethelred, pointing to a form well back behind the rank of the soldiers, plainly visible through the wide opening of the entrance. "'Tis

Paulo. Perhaps we may break through the ranks, and if we do I'll stop long enough to spit him on my sword."

"I'll make way for thee," said the giant, taking from a rack a long iron bar and swinging it about his head. "He is swift of foot, but keep to him, lad, and when thy sword is through his ribs twist it sharply about. If the blade is broad I've seen it work like a charm of magic."

"Put up the bar and stand back," commanded Cainor, brusquely.

Volgus laughed and swung his weapon about him.

The leader of the soldiers now stepped into the hall.

"Thine errand, officer?" inquired Cainor.

The German saluted, for the master of the gladiators ranked at the quarters with a tribune in the streets.

"The arrest of an ex-gladiator, Volgus, and a barbarian Briton, whose descriptions have been posted," said the German. "They were reported by the Lord Attilus and the Gaul Calcus as being here. I see them now at thy side."

Volgus uttered a roar of rage; his eyes darted fire at the Gaul, and Ethelred drew his sword as two soldiers entered through the doorway and stood at their leader's back.

Volgus made a step forward as though he would have leaped upon Calcus, but Cainor lifted a warning hand and motioned the men of the quarters about him.

"Calcus had the right to give thee information touching a posted man, but Volgus was a gladiator and hath the silver foil, and this place is refuge," he said. "None such may be arrested at the quarters, as hath been the law since the days of Tiberius. Take the Briton and welcome, but I am responsible for Volgus."

The face of Paulo now looked in at the arched doorway, and, like a flash of light Calcus threw himself upon Ethelred. He seemed to answer a signal, and clasping the

young man by the shoulders he set his knee in his back and whirled him to the floor. Seized from behind, Ethelred was powerless to resist the unexpected assault, and before he could recover himself and put forth his strength in return the two soldiers had pinned him by the wrists.

With a cry like that of an enraged beast Volgus leaped forward, swinging his bar high in the air; but Cainor sprang before him, seizing him about the waist. Volgus strove to strike at once, but Virgil and Placidus, with a score of others, set upon him with their great muscles, and for a moment the mass heaved like a mountain in labor.

"Cease, old Hercules!" gasped Cainor, his breath coming thick and fast. "Thou art among friends, and remember, this is thy refuge."

The giant relaxed his efforts, and, as the gladiators noted it and fell away from him, flung his bar to the floor.

"His weapon," he cried, pointing to the long sword of Ethelred which the German now had in his possession. "Give it up!" and his voice was thick and his face red from his anger and exertions. "It is against the law for a soldier to take a weapon from the quarters of the gladiators."

"That is the law," said Cainor. "None knoweth it better than he."

The German delivered the sword to the outstretched hand of the captain of the gladiators, and immediately Volgus seized it with a fierce gesture.

"I will make it right about thee, lad," he cried. "I will keep this blade until thy friends may release thee. I would come with thee now but that I am better outside."

"Truly," replied Ethelred. "Look to thyself, and be careful what thou mayst say to—the daughter of Lucius."

"By all the heathen gods!" roared the giant, again convulsed with rage, "I shall kill this slippery Gaul before I have gone from this roof."

Calcus fell back with an evil laugh, the gladiators forming about him and pressing him to their rear, and as Volgus stood as though irresolute the German and his men led Ethelred from the building.

XXVI

BRABANO AND POPPÆA

AS Brabano had journeyed towards Capreæ his thoughts were busy. They traversed his past, they lingered about his present, and they sought to penetrate the future. If the outlook was dark he had the courage to meet it, and he felt within himself the strength of a new purpose. He left Rome in the night and travelled in a litter, a luxury which his great wealth permitted, and which he preferred to a chariot because of the opportunity it gave him for meditation and repose. The distance was great for such a method, but he needed its quiet that he might collect his thoughts. Relays were provided, and stations for this purpose had been established between the city and the island, in which service hundreds of waiting slaves were employed—brawny men with the strength of gladiators. This was to be maintained during the entire stay of Nero at Capreæ. Brabano could not be long absent from attendance upon the tyrant. Nero was often ill, and even the wondrous air of the magic cliffs was not a panacea for his excesses; and now that this man of reason, of calculation, and judgment — this man of cool habit and fixed resolve — had settled his state of mind with himself, he desired to be again at his post. He knew his duty. The words of Peter had pierced the mailed covering of his heart like rays of light; they rang yet in his ears and echoed through his brain. He did not know how he would reconcile his

new faith with the detail of his office, still less with certain relationships in his mode of life. These last he would now abandon, and that necessity played about his fancy, and, despite the healing balm that had seemingly poured through all his nature, the thought touched as an acid upon a wound.

Poppæa, the fair and frail empress of beauty! she of imperious vanity and pride, insatiable in her lust of homage — how make amends to her for the amends he had made to himself?

His journey was finished; he crossed the three miles of blue water to the landing-place at the foot of the frowning cliffs, and was borne along the green valley, through the graceful woodlands, and up the slope to where the turrets of the great villa rose to their prospect above the sea. He heard the notes of a lyre mingled with the sound of dancing feet upon the marbles of the terrace; he saw a gay throng, their locks wreathed in garlands, bearing silken banners as they marched in all the gaudy coloring of a holiday assemblage before a raised throne under a purple canopy, where Nero sat with his tablets upon his knee. The spectacle riveted his gaze, for he knew that he had come again to those familiar scenes, to be for him now a battle-ground where he would fight the good fight, the end of which he could not foretell.

He did not join the revellers nor have his slaves announce his arrival, but, alighting from his litter, went at once to his apartments. Here he removed the stains of travel and refreshed himself with a draught of wine. He knew the ordeal that threatened him, and that his respite would not be for long. Poppæa had awaited the hour of his coming, and Nero was engaged.

How could he hope to impress upon her light mind the profound emotion that dwelt in his—how justify a change that must put aside her smile and explain that

it was not in scorn? He knew her moods and, in her, the instinct for catlike refuge in revenge. Ten thousand lies would not avail him had he now such purpose, and here the truth was meaningless. He was fierce in his nature, and had brought to her wilfulness a depth and strength that had mocked the tired energies of her wasted master. She had leaned upon him as an oak, the sap of which had added a subtle health to her beauty. Her jealous sense would see a rival, and her fury be without restraint. A thin smile played upon his lips as he thought of the gathering storm and knew how it would break above him—a smile indicative of his own self-scornful mood and marking his determination to meet and abide the results.

Thoughtfully he paced the chamber, his broad brow bent with its reflections. A secret corridor led to her apartments and likewise to the chambers of the Emperor; it was used in his visits as a minister of both strength and weakness. Each moment he thought to hear the rustle of her robes along its walls. She came, and he heard her familiar step. A knock fell lightly upon the panelled door, and then it slipped into the wall as the tapestries were thrust aside.

She paused to listen, exhibiting her moment of customary caution, and then she pushed the door into its place and stood before him.

He stepped forward and took her hand, bowing low as he kissed it, smiling at the amused surprise that manifested itself in her face. Then he led her to a seat.

"Welcome, good stranger," she said, her merriment continuing. "What hath happened in Rome to change my Brabano from a lover to a courtier?"

"Much hath happened in Rome," he replied, gravely, "of so serious an import that I scare know how to tell it. I am still thy slave, but grown more worthy. If my gracious lady will have patience—if she will trust her

devoted servant to make known to her that which he hath learned himself—it may bless and save them both."

He spoke without his accustomed plausibility and care. For the first time his accents were honest and the words and the sensation were strange to him.

Her face changed instantly, and both her hands clasped his, the clutch nervous and uncertain.

"Why dost thou speak so — of saving?" she asked. "Much hath happened here. Little of moment can happen, I fancy, where Nero is not, and he is in Capreæ and not in Rome. I am glad of thy return."

Her bosom heaved a sigh, and in her eyes was a look of fear.

He regarded her with an astonishment which he made no effort to conceal.

He was yet to know the nature of the change that had enveloped him, and, new to its influence, he was yet to learn its power.

"What is it?" he asked.

The look of fear in her face was intensified.

"Nero hath new fancies," she said—"fancies that frighten me, since I know him. He hath been listening to a Greek wizard, who told him of a Syrian queen that poisoned her lord. 'Twas a story told as poem, and then he made a prophecy that the Emperor should find an illness in a cup which some mistress shall put to his lips. Tigellinus hath used it to frighten him, seeking to induce him to return to Rome; and last night he spoke of Octavia, and looked at me so gloomily that I could guess his thoughts as though he uttered them. To-day he refused to eat with me, and now Faustina is sitting by his side as he writes his verses to the lion. His mood is as savage as the beast that is in his mind, and all the pageantry before him is futile to lighten it. I did not sleep last night, being filled with fear, and to-day I sus-

pect the wine that even my maid hands me. Dost understand?"

"What dost thou fear?" he asked, smiling.

"Fear!" she cried. "Dost *thou* ask such a question? What should any fear who deal with this madman? What have all feared who found their terror real and went, one by one, to the grave because Nero willed it? What folly it was that urged me to seek a place in such surroundings, and how am I punished! I knew him, but fancied my influence had power to keep him in subjection. He pleaded, he begged, he swore by all the gods that he worshipped me, and that I should never have cause to doubt his faith or devotion if I consented to the banishment of Otho; and now each thought is a vagary, and the spectres of those whom he hath sent beyond the Styx goad him to new deeds of devilish malice to stifle his memory of the old. The lowliest beggar in the streets of Rome is happier than I. What can I do, Brabano? Where fly for safety?"

He was silent, regarding her disturbed countenance with a fixed and rigid gaze. His eyes held a deep and inexplicable meaning.

Her despair changed to fury.

"There is a way," she said, her beautiful face convulsed. "This wretch can be dealt with as he hath dealt with others. And I will do it if thou wilt help me, my Brabano."

She looked at him, her gaze tense with inquiry and full of meaning.

"Nay," he said, his voice smooth and full and his manner soothing. "Calm thyself. Thou art in no danger, and wert thou, I could save thee, as powerless as I may be hereafter to save myself."

She heaved a sigh of deep relief, but her eyes still looked into his. His words fell upon her perturbed spirit like a balm, but her heart still struggled with

doubt. This he saw, and he smiled again to further reassure her.

"I, myself, know the Emperor," he said, slowly, "and it would be a vain task, even for me, to convince thee that anything could hold his hand against his will. But he is yet a puppet to thy beauty, and will remain so."

She was comforted, and her eyes lighted. But her bosom was still heaving.

"He is a madman," she urged, "and under the spell of fear, or moved by the malice of Tigellinus, he acts without reason. How often have I seen him weep today for the things he did yesterday."

"Tigellinus hath malice enough," said the physician, "but not against thee. Thou art more to be trusted than Faustina, whose influence would endure not a week; this Tigellinus knows as well as any. Nero hath fancies, truly, and is gloomy under the spell of fear; but thy beauty is a cure for them, and with thee gone he would find no other solace. Fool though he is, he knows so much. Keep heart."

"Dost thou believe it?" she asked, her accents grateful. "Even though he should suspect—"

She stopped as she looked at him, her tones now melting in tenderness.

"In spite of all or anything," he continued, his countenance unmoved. "I can dispel his fancies, and will do so; but, my Poppæa—my Empress—I have myself found fancies in Rome that nothing will dispel—fancies that unmake and must serve to end me."

"Thou!" she exclaimed, with an incredulous look upon her face. "My wise Brabano! thou hast said it, but I do not understand."

"I would that thou couldst do so," he replied.

"Unmake thee—end thee?" she asked.

"Make me anew, perhaps, but end me surely."

He stepped back and extended his arms to their

length; his gesture was majestic and expressive of his old dignity and power.

"I am a Christian," he said.

Her face was perplexed.

"What new pleasantry is this?" she asked. "I have heard of these Christians, but what have they in common with thee? They are the vagabonds of the wharves and alleys whom Nero is to sacrifice at the games—vile Jews, as Tigellinus says, who practise mysterious rites and slay children after dark. What art thou saying?"

His face was grave at the immense task before him. Hers was a nature not to understand, with a viperish malice that would hate the gentle precepts of the Christian creed when a sense of it stole to her mind. He had no thought to convince her, and once a knowledge of the truth coming to her comprehension she would be as swift to destroy him as Tigellinus himself. But he had set his foot to the path and must tread it to the end.

"Thou knowest the noble lady Pomponia?"

"I know her," replied Poppæa, with a smile. "She is a vestal by repute, a hypocrite in practice, and is virtuous because she is no longer young and beautiful. I have heard Crispinella say so a thousand times, as hast thou. What of her?"

"She is a Christian," said Brabano. "I have wondered often at the serenity of her state, the dignity and happiness of her life, and the noble deeds which she has practised in spite of the glamour and wickedness which surrounded her in the city. She hath little claim upon the saving grace of the Christian faith; she was virtuous from the beginning. It is sinners, saith Paul, whom Christ came to call to repentance."

Poppæa's gaze grew scornful, but her face expressed curiosity. The mention of Pomponia's name interested her, for it had been especially the gibe of every ribald gallant of the court; but her wealth and station, the

grandeur of her life, and a remote connection with the family of the Amici, of which her late husband was a member, had compelled the outward respect of even Nero himself.

"The immediate noble family of Amici are Christians, also," continued Brabano. "The words which have come to them, as to me, have done their work. Thou wilt learn more of this upon thy return to Rome. It is not our purpose to deny the faith, although we are not uselessly to waste our lives. We know the hate of Nero and that of the evil throng surrounding us; we have been a part of it ourselves, but henceforth we must speak the truth."

"The Amici—all!" cried Poppæa, in profound surprise. "Is Fabyan Amici a Christian?"

"'Tis a faith that heals, that cures, that saves," said Brabano. "My skill as a physician is as naught to it, for it brings a balm to the mind and heart as well as to the body; it robs the grave of its victory and promises life everlasting. He that believeth on Christ shall never die. So saith Paul, the Apostle."

"What is this?" asked Poppæa, her eyes sparkling. "Is it some draught of life? Will it keep youth, bring health, and preserve beauty? Tell me, my Brabano."

She was a woman now full of the lightest foibles of her sex. Death was a nightmare that hung ever over her and the tomb a word at which to shudder. Life was the all in all to this woman of the moment, Empress of the world, yet trembling under the weight of her station, and doomed to terror in the darkness of the night. From her youth the slaves had told her stories of magic, of spells, and of horrors, and the spectacles of the arena had quickened with their dreadful scenes fancies that became most hideous visions in her dreams. She was a child in impulse, although wise and mature in judgment, and her wickedness, ingrained though it was into

her very nature, had its motive in long custom and the daily intimacy of evil associations. Her curiosity was eager, and Brabano grew thoughtful as he observed her.

Was this possibly a soil in which seed would grow? Beneath her pride and cruelty and greed was there some abyss that knew the darkness of all life and longed to fill itself with the hope which only the Christian promise could give? Was there not a miracle in his own redemption? She was a woman and could feel; and she could fear and hope and suffer. Might he sanctify a meeting born of sin and make it a communion of peace?

He seated himself beside her, and with his eyes strong in the impulse that stirred his powerful nature, and his voice deep with the passion that now thrilled his whole being, he began the telling of the story of the cross.

XXVII

THE FIRE

NERO'S poem to the lion was duly finished, but an event of more significance hastened his departure from his island. Tigellinus had wearied of the beauty of Capreæ. The sun-caves, green and purple, the haughty cliffs so in harmony with the majesty which the wealth of Rome had lavished upon garden and walk, and wall and battlement which decorated in dreams of white those heights above the most beautiful of bays had grown stale to his pent-up energies. In vain he sought to turn again the attention of Nero to the Palatine; he was powerless to stir him from his new interest in his verse. The poem was complete, but its delivery required thought. This inaction hung upon the more vigorous prefect like a weight, and he chafed under the thought of Myrrha yet undiscovered and the Amici at peace. His patience tried beyond its usual strength, he almost forgot his accustomed servility, and strove to influence Nero by means more direct.

The Emperor had put aside his fear, his forebodings, and that depression which had so alarmed Poppæa, and revelled now with almost a childish delight in the vanity of authorship. His familiars were called about him to hear his work, and Poppæa, once more in his favor, sat upon his right to lend her praises to the adulation showered upon him. He was filled with exultant fancies; he would read his verses in the great hall before the senators, while the lion, Caligula, in a cage of gold,

should be drawn before the throne. Its head should be crowned with flowers, and garlands wreathed in its mane. The first victim thrown to its bloody fangs should be some patrician guilty of treason to the state. He would find such a person for the delectation of the people, never fear; there were many such in Rome. At present he must give his whole attention to his rhymes, and later, when he discussed with his secretary the burning of Troy, and grew animated under the description of its recital, the minister conceived a thought wherein his evil malice arose to grandeur.

That night he sent a messenger to the north, and the evening following brought a courier with news that set the Villa Jovis in a ferment. The prefect and his master went at chariot speed to the capital, with orders for the court to follow. Rome was in flames.

The fire had broken out in the vicinity of the Circus Maximus, in a dilapidated palace owned by Tigellinus, which was used as a storehouse. The shops and wretched buildings which surrounded the prodigious structure of the circus were filled with combustible materials and those light properties used for the spectacles of the games, and the numerous wine-shops of the neighborhood were stored with liquors. Here the flames had firmly established themselves, and, as though seeking a mighty victory, rolled northward towards the eastern front of the Palatine. The conflagration spread with a vast avidity. The house of Lucius, far away upon the Pincius, was beyond the zone of danger, but that of Fabyan was within the progress of the flames. Clouds of smoke rolled over the Subura, and, seeing it doomed, the youthful tribune became indifferent to his own possessions, his one thought being of the safety of his beloved.

Even in such a moment he did not dare remove her to her home, notwithstanding the continued absence of

Nero and Tigellinus. He knew too well their devious ways to assume the slightest risk, and thought at once that they might the better seek to carry out their designs against her under the cover of the confusion which now reigned. The time was ripe for such a purpose, and his caution grew more acute. There was little doubt of the fate of the neighborhood which was her present refuge, and she must flee at once; so with Paul and Gabrial he conveyed her, with the frightened women, Ruth, Miriam, and the child Mary, to a house adjoining that of Peter beyond the Tiber. This was a dwelling owned also by Zekiah, who possessed other houses in that vicinity, to which he brought his own people, wild with the losses he must endure, and filling the air with his lamentations.

Volgus, in the mean time, had left the quarters of the gladiators and come to their assistance. His comrades had intervened, and he had been unable to wreak his vengeance upon the betrayer of Ethelred or the false Calcus, whom he now hated with all the intensity of his fierce nature. The Gaul was not liked among his fellows, but he was a valued factor in the games. Gladiators were creatures of public value. They often, by their fierce disregard of the citizens about them, incurred bitter enmity, but the law was strict that they were not to be slain by bribe, stealth, or poison. Private quarrels were not to be tolerated at the training-quarters if they led to bloodshed not in the public interest. They could not always be averted, but it was because of the necessity to prevent them that the master in charge held high rank and was a person of signal strength and distinction. Cainor was a leader of experience, and dominated his rude charges with a relentless hand. He stopped all trouble at the inception, saying that opportunities were plentiful to satisfy all grudges in the future. Personal foes were pitted against each other in the amphitheatre, and heavy wagers were laid by the public who were in-

formed of their quarrel, because of the greater interest the combat between such fighters excited.

So Cainor called his men about him and invoked the law of the quarters. Volgus could not strike against it, but he relinquished nothing of his purpose; he set his immense jaws together to choke down his baffled fury, and in his heart his design struggled with the gathering forces of delay, the deeper because deferred.

Sullenly he had returned to his friends to tell his story, stolid under the consternation which it created. But the Apostle saw beneath the mighty surface and sorrowed at the change. He saw in the set eyes the savage gleam of the former days of strife, and even the aged and gentle Peter was powerless to soften the awakened temper of the giant. The fury of the freedman burst forth for a moment from under the sullen curb in which he held it when he saw his mistress, Valentina, and he swore with a mighty oath that he would discard all thought of the Christian faith until he had slain the cringing Paulo and torn the treacherous Gaul limb from limb.

The news of the arrest of Ethelred filled them all with dismay, but to Valentina it brought the agony of despair. Her mother was powerless to comfort her, and her tears went deep into the heart of Lucius. They served to emphasize to the old Roman the changed conditions of his fortunes, for the time was recent when he would have laughed at such an incident and gone at once to set the young man free by an order to the centurion in charge. Fabyan had had like power, but now both were helpless.

Wild with grief, the girl flew to throw herself into the arms of the sister of her heart, the gentle Myrrha, sure of a sympathy that would weep tears like her own. Her father was glad to take her to any chance of solace, and Fulvia accompanied them. Lucius desired to consult with Fabyan and talk also with Paul, upon whose judg-

ment and direction he had come to lean with a strange confidence. Brabano was away, but the Amici had other friends, and nothing must be left undone to succor the unfortunate young Briton before delay should make influence unavailing. His rank as a foreigner and his station at home were as nothing to the Roman mind, and Nero, unrestrained, would scarce give his life a thought.

He delivered his daughter safe into Myrrha's embrace, and clasped Fabyan's hand with something in the touch that told his nephew of his state of mind. With one accord their hopes went to their friend, the powerful physician of the court.

Paul was absent when they reached the house beyond the Tiber, but Myrrha's presence brought some comfort to Valentina, who was cheered by the assurance of her sister that Ethelred must soon be released. Her father had not said so much, and these assurances had little value beyond the tender sympathy behind them.

Gloomily Lucius and Fabyan sat down to consider upon their course of action. The magnitude of the calamity that had fallen upon the city confused their efforts, and added to the perplexities that beset them.

The house in which Gabrial, with his family and Myrrha, now had refuge was a low but roomy structure, well back from the river, in the crowded section of the Jewish district, but outside the Ghetto proper and upon a slope which afforded a view of the city beyond the stream. A small court was in its centre, enclosed on three sides by the body of the building in front, and two wings extended backward on either end, the rear screened by a wall. A small yard, with a surface of green, and filled with shrubbery, encircled the house in front and ran beyond the eastern wing. This grateful space secured for them an additional privacy, in which they could indulge, unchecked, the sorrow that possessed

them. The excitement which prevailed on every side, and the threatened peril which had dazed and stunned those who saw ruin and death in the spreading flames, left them unheeded by any prying neighbors. The soldiers of the guard had gathered to aid in the suppression of the fire, and sections were marshalled about the choked bridges that were a mass of fugitives. The streets were unguarded, and even Volgus felt free to show himself at will in this spot, remote, as he conceived, from any present peril to himself. But the caution of Fabyan kept them all within doors, and his attendants, with those that had come with Lucius and Fulvia when Valentina was brought to Myrrha, were posted at various points in the neighborhood to keep watch for any loitering strangers. They were faithful and trusted slaves, who would suffer death in the service of the households of which they were a part.

Gathered now in the large chamber which occupied the southern wing of the dwelling, through the window of which they could see the flames and smoke which filled the distant heavens, they reasoned fearfully upon the situation which had come to them.

Valentina lay prostrate upon a couch, her hands clasped about her temples, dry-eyed now in the mute grief that had followed her first despair, and Myrrha half reclined beside her, her arm resting in sympathy upon the recumbent form. Volgus, with Gabrial, stood at the window, engrossed by the distant spectacle, while Lucius and Fabyan sat in the centre of the room, the pale-faced women about them.

Ethelred had not been taken to the Mamertine; of that Volgus had been able to assure himself before he had returned to them. The prisons of the inner district had been crowded of late, and he had been conveyed to a cell in the Circus of Sallust, far beyond any probable course of the fire. This knowledge tempered their grief,

and, freed from a sense of any immediate danger to her lover, Valentina was able to recover in part her composure. Gabrial turned from the window as a noise was heard outside.

"'Tis Paul," he said. "He hath returned from across the river."

"Is he coming?" asked Fabyan, after a pause, during which time the Apostle did not appear.

"He hath stopped at the cottage next door to speak with the wife of Peter and with Peter's son, who have called to him. Peter now joins him from the cottage, and they are coming here together."

Almost immediately their footsteps were heard in the yard without, and the two men entered the chamber. Paul and Lucius arose to welcome them, while the women hastened to provide them with seats. The aged disciple stopped at the couch to lay his thin hand upon the flushed forehead of the afflicted Valentina; he murmured a word of hope that brought a sad smile to her tear-stained face, and then seated himself with the others in the centre of the chamber.

The habit of Paul was disordered and his features discolored by smoke. Ashes and the stains of cinders were upon the linen of his robe.

"It is a frightful thing which is happening over yonder," he said. "I have been in its heart and have seen its horrors. It is probable that all of the city which is not upon the hills may go, and thousands have perished already. Our poor brethren! God hath sent to many a more merciful death than that for which the tyrant reserved them. Hundreds have been suffocated in their cells by the dust and smoke, suffering little pain beyond the terror, and we may be assured that to the extent of fear they were comforted."

"Who are they who have died?" asked Ruth, in a hushed voice, while Miriam, with the child Mary upon

her lap, listened with a face that bespoke her sadness.

"Did we know them?"

"Alas!" replied the Apostle, "we knew them well. Thy cousin, Miriam, the wife of Simon, David the stonecutter, and many others."

Ruth sobbed aloud, while Miriam's tears fell upon the silken tresses of the child. The innocent eyes of the little girl grew wide at the anguish of her mother, and she hid her face on the bosom of her aunt and wept with them. From her birth she had been taught that it was the lot of her people to suffer, and her tender sympathies were acute. Paul caressed her with his kindly hand, and under his touch she lifted her head with a look of reverence to his brave face and his voice of comfort.

"It is the lot that God hath reserved for us," he said; "and we should weep only as He wept at the bier of Lazarus. As surely as fall the shadows of night the day cometh with the morning!"

"What may we do for young Ethelred?" asked Lucius. "We waited for thy coming in order that we might seek thy counsel. Heretofore the arrests have been mostly among the poor and lowly, and there seems to be little enmity against the Christians who are high in place. Pomponia is a Christian, having been converted while with her noble husband in Corinth, where thou hast set up a church, and Berenice hath not feared to speak Christian words at court. Is the enmity of Nero against the faith, or doth he make it an excuse to persecute the helpless out of a cruelty that will provide a murderous spectacle for the amphitheatre?"

"Nero is incensed against the Christians because Tigellinus hath set him on," said Fabyan, who did not care to say how few were the Christian words which Berenice had spoken; "but hast thou forgotten, uncle, that it is

not for the sake of the faith that Ethelred is in prison. It is because of his loyalty to us."

"It is true," replied Lucius, sadly. "I little thought to see the time in Rome when loyalty to an Amici would bring a stranger to prison. We both know well when it hath sufficed to throw down the bars. But it matters not, since it is as it is. Let us repair together to the Palatine and see the Princess Berenice."

"Thou art going," said Mary, who had listened to their words, "to the place where the cruel Nero is?"

Lucius had arisen, but stopped and regarded her with wonder. It had not been the fashion of the patrician Roman to regard at all the lowly, and particularly the lowly among the Jews. It was strikingly the case with the children of the poor. They were seen about the streets playing in the dirt, dodging about the wheels of the chariots, and interrupting the progress of the litter-bearers; they were generally little more to be considered than the idle and vagabond dogs; but both Lucius and Fabyan had learned, as many learn, that pride of rank and a haughty bearing are but assumptions after all, and that human flesh, be it plebeian or patrician, is subject to the same earthly limitations. Struck instantly from the highest place among the nobles of the world, they found they were as the poor people among whom they were glad to find comfort, and, groping all their lives among the uncertainties and falsehoods of paganism, they had gained from these Jewish haunts the promise of something beyond this life of pain and care.

He noted now that the child before him was beautiful, and that she had in her face the same winning charm that he remembered in the babyhood of the two girls that were his daughters. She had slipped from her place upon the lap of her aunt, and now stood with her hands clasped before him.

"Tell the cruel Nero," she said, "how good is the kind

Ethelred with the hair that is fair and his gentle face. Tell him of the pretty stories he can speak of his home in Brittany, where the grass is always green, where there are deer upon the hills, and the white lambs with their fleece of wool sport always beneath the wide oak-trees. The wicked Emperor would not keep him from the beautiful country of which he hath told me if he knew how the kind Ethelred loves it; and could he but hear him speak his heart would be melted, and he could not harm one with a voice so lovely."

The tears of Valentina burst forth afresh, and the hand of Fabyan trembled as he stood beside Lucius and placed it upon the childish head.

"Pray, little one, for us all," he said, "no less than for the good Ethelred, who hath thy pretty heart, and whom we all love as dost thou. We need not fear the wicked Emperor since we are shielded by the God of Peter. Ethelred will come back to thee."

He stooped and pressed the child in his arms, and with Lucius left the house to go to the Palatine.

When they were in the yard both stopped for an instant, affrighted at the sight which met their gaze.

The sky was a mountain of smoke, the dark volume of which was penetrated by tongues of flame. It seemed as though the river was ablaze. From the Palatine, through the Velabrium, beyond the Forum Pacis, clear to the Janiculum bridge, the city was a furnace.

"The fire hath reached the Viminalis," said Lucius. "Thou must build elsewhere, my Fabyan."

"Not so," replied Fabyan, watching the course of the flames steadily. "I look now to escape, since the wind sets towards the Campus Martius. It is not the flames that I dread, mine uncle. If we can regain our former power and avert the wrath of Nero the future will hold all that I may ask for myself and for my Myrrha."

Lucius sighed.

"When I think of who Ahenobarbus is and who are his counsellors I am in despair," he said. "Mine eyes are opened since I have learned wisdom of Paul. But if those who suffer are to make the foundations of the Church, I am content with the future, however it may deal with me and with those I love."

XXVIII

THE INCIDENTS OF FATE

NERO hurried to Rome. With Tigellinus and a picked company of his favorites he flew northward with all the speed that his swift Arabians possessed. Before him flashed a mounted convoy of prætorians, their golden corselets flashing in the sun and their mettled steeds leading the gilded chariots at a gallop. The roads were broad and firm, for the way to Capreæ had been trimmed and pared as though it were a walk in the garden of the Palatine, and the cortège startled the vine-growers at their tasks by the way as it speeded past. The villagers were used to courier and chariot, and the court and its train, that had periodically taken way towards the palaces of Tiberius since Capreæ had first become an Imperial abiding-place, but never had they seen the gaudy companies exhibit such unimperial haste.

The cavalcade stopped only for a brief rest and refreshment; but the night had passed and the morning was well gone when the eager travellers saw in the distance the first evidences of the conflagration. Their excitement grew as the distance diminished, for messenger after messenger met them at each point of their progress, bringing an additional story of the spread of the flames.

They pushed forward with renewed speed, the eyes of Nero glittering with a strange excitement, and even Tigellinus shared something of the unusual interest of

his master. He, more than any other, knew the dreadful secret of this holocaust, but, callous beyond words and indifferent to all results, he saw it only as an incident to his own purpose and advantage. But as they neared the scene Nero saw it as an incident of grandeur and beauty, and his attention grew more rapt and absorbed. As cries of admiration, wonder, and delight burst from him from time to time, his dark prefect smiled with a satisfied significance, as though tempted to reveal to him where the indebtedness for this splendid spectacle lay.

The guard that rode ahead had cleared the Appian Way, but some miles to the south of the city they diverged sharply west, and, crossing the river, sped northward by the Via Portuensis, making their first point of destination a country place owned by Tigellinus on Vatican hill. The embers were yet hot south of the Circus Maximus, and, although the great structure was unharmed, the messengers stated that walls were falling along the way, the wind drifting smoke and sparks overhead, and the heat of the furnace was wafted in great, fiery breaths about the Imperial palaces on the Palatine. The view from the terraces of the country place of Tigellinus, upon the slopes of Vatican hill, would be magnificent, and after the rest of another day they might make their way to the Palatine and view the further progress of the flames at leisure and from a closer prospect.

Nero drove ahead, standing erect in his ivory car, and while his white Arabians spurned the causeway, gave himself over to admiration of the scene. Tigellinus, with his blacks, hung close at his side, steering clear of his master's wheels, but keeping a proximity that permitted conversation. Both were fascinated by the awful spectacle that each moment enlarged to their vision, and behind them echoed the exclamations, shouts, and colloquies of their wildly excited followers.

Heading towards the Septiminian Way, they reached it south of the Janiculum bridge, midway between the ridge and the river, and in the broad drive Nero drew rein.

"Whither go we?" he asked of Tigellinus.

The favorite pulled his steeds to a halt and looked before him.

"Straight forward," he replied. "I see that the guard is waiting. I will direct them. Let us press to that declivity ahead, and from its elevation we can cover a wide reach of the city; 'tis a view that will rest us before we proceed further. This is a sight that comes but once in a lifetime, for cities are too precious to be thus wasted often."

"The vicinity is vile," said Nero, looking about him and sniffing with his nose. " 'Tis a reflection upon the grandeur of the flames."

"If the wind would but deign to blow in this direction with sufficient violence we might have an opportunity to rebuild it," laughed Tigellinus; "but there is no such luck. It will spread through the Forum Romanum, but spare the Jews. Let us stop to breathe for a moment upon that eminence yonder, which we can reach but shortly. There we may dismount and stretch our cramped bodies, viewing the flames for a time at leisure. Then we can pass on to my haven."

"Keep the guards closer, and tell the Germans to draw about us as we wait," commanded Nero. "The fire will drive scores of ruffians to this side for shelter."

The prefect had pointed with his threadlike whip in the direction of an eminence arising above the mass of houses in a thickly settled portion of the district at a point to the left of the highway. After giving his orders, as directed by his master, they once more sped forward.

Arriving at the base of the gentle slope towards which

the road had gradually risen, they left the highway and threaded a small lane somewhat broader than the network of narrow streets about them, which intersected the road leading northward. Drawing into an open spot that was grassy and level they dismounted, and, giving their chariots in charge of their attending slaves, strode up the slope.

"Who are those knaves darting yonder?" asked Nero, as several forms sped before them.

"Stragglers who are running from our guard," replied the favorite. "I see a house which is in the open and commands a better view," he continued; "let us go there."

He looked towards it as they moved ahead in answer to his words, and then stopped suddenly, with a muttered exclamation.

"As I live!" he cried. "I see a tall and familiar form at the doorway. By the gods! it sees us also."

"Who is it?" asked Nero, his curiosity awake.

But the prefect, with a shout to his men, was already beyond hearing, and was waving his drawn sword towards the house.

The mounted horsemen evidently understood, for they answered his call at once, and, swarming forward, fell into order with the celerity of practised soldiers, drawing a cordon about the place, the escort that attended upon the chariots rushing to assist them, following the waving blade of the prefect.

The man whose figure had drawn his attention had looked forth from the doorway, standing carelessly in the view, but at the shout that had come to his ear he had plunged at once into shelter. Then he peered forth again, and instantly an excitement was manifested in the chamber which he had entered. Faces appeared at the windows, and others looked through the door from behind the great form that filled it.

The person was that of Volgus, and the house, by a strange fatality, was that which sheltered Myrrha and the family of Gabrial and his friends.

The giant stood irresolute as the soldiers surrounded the place, the breath coming hard from his heavy chest. He clinched his hands convulsively, looking almost appealingly at Fulvia, who was pale but courageous, behind him.

"What does it mean?" asked Gabrial.

Paul and Peter had gone to the city to aid such as might need help, leaving shortly after the departure of Lucius and Fabyan. Gabrial had remained at the house with the women and Volgus, where Fulvia, with Valentina, awaited the return of Lucius. But few of the watching slaves had managed to get through the cordon of soldiers, so unexpected had been their arrival and so rapid their action under the orders of the prefect. The two who had reached the house were unable to say more than that they were beset by soldiers in the dress of the prætorian guard, and this the inmates could see for themselves.

As the noise of an approaching intruder fell upon their ears the giant looked about him for a weapon. An oaken bar, which served to fasten the door at night, was within his reach, and this he seized, drawing back for a space in which to swing it above his head.

"Stand away all," he said. "I shall brain the soldier as he comes through the door."

"Peace," said Gabrial, lifting his hand. "That is the counsel Paul would give. We shall offer no resistance."

"Stay thy hand, Volgus," commanded Fulvia. "Let us first know the mission of these men. I have not usually been afraid of soldiers, and the wife of Lucius hath not been accustomed to tremble in the presence of arms."

"I saw the man who led them," replied the giant, his

voice a deep grunt in his bosom. "If I but kill him, it is worth all that may thereafter happen."

Almost instantly Tigellinus, with his drawn sword, passed through the doorway and entered the chamber. Two of his soldiers came at his heels, but he waved them back and stood alone in the room.

He had pressed immediately through his guard when he had seen the house surrounded, eager to know the meaning of the presence of Volgus at such a spot. He guessed to a certainty that the house also sheltered Myrrha, and, once within the chamber, he drew a deep breath of satisfaction as he found his surmise correct.

The waiting giant with his threatening bar, the placid Gabrial, the startled women, with the girls who had risen and now stood staring at him as he darkened the threshold, made a picture which he surveyed with a mocking smile.

"A greeting all, my gentle friends," he said, doffing the light helmet with its snowy plume that rested upon his head. "And thou, old Volgus, is it thy wont to threaten the prætor who, in his youthful days and before his distinction, so often applauded thee in the amphitheatre? Fie, man! lower thy stout timber — a poor weapon in the skilled hands of a gladiator—or I shall be forced, even in the presence of ladies, to trim it with my sword. Most noble Fulvia, my fair Valentina, and my gentle Myrrha, what strange wonder brings thee to such a place?"

There was no answer to his speech. They looked at him as though dazed.

Then Mary spoke tremblingly and in fear; she was clinging about the skirt of her mother's garments, eying the intruder as though she had a knowledge of the fear that deprived her elders of the power of utterance.

"Is it the cruel Emperor, mother?" she asked—"the bad Nero who so wickedly murdered his dear mother?"

The face of Tigellinus was alight again with its evil smile.

"It is a charming innocent," he said, as Ruth fearfully covered the lips of the child with her hand to prevent her saying more. "'Tis not the good Emperor, my birdlet, but he is close at hand. When he comes I will have thee repeat to him thy pretty question. It will show him the care thy good parents have in thy teaching. I think I understand," he continued, speaking to Fulvia, his manner changing; "the flames have driven thee to this place for shelter."

"Thou art right, most noble prefect," replied the matron. "These good people are our clients, and the flames have destroyed all that they possess. We came with them here to provide for their safety."

He looked about the apartment, his countenance now in doubt, his perplexity growing.

"A generous deed; but was it necessary that so many should participate in it? Surely, it seemeth to me that Lucius or thy freedmen might have sufficed. And thou, old Volgus, wert thou, too, afraid of the flames; and did it take these gentle ladies to see thee safely across the river and out of peril? Hast thou forgotten what I said to thee upon our last meeting—that thou wouldst surely fall into disgrace? 'Tis the fate of the gladiator who blenches from the fray and barters an honorable death for the repose of retirement."

"I think," said the giant, "that I recall thy words, and I sent the answer by one of thy centurions."

"The truth, or a part thereof," laughed Tigellinus, "and a villanous answer it was; but something of it is to the credit of the high and noble Lucius, thy master. Nero hath a memory of it, too, and it quite annoyed him. A bad sign, old fighter, for thy retirement and repose."

A soldier now entered the room.

"Cæsar desires thee," he said to Tigellinus, saluting. "He is impatient."

The prefect resumed his helmet and swung about to obey the mandate, but paused before his departure and again addressed Fulvia.

"I will return, dear ladies, shortly. Meantime, I must deprive thee of this frail charge, against whom Cæsar hath something in the way of a reprimand. Thou wilt see him again, I promise thee—that is, if we have the honor of thy company at the games. Come, sir," he continued to Volgus, "put by thy weapon and follow me at once."

His face was stern now and his eyes dark. He turned upon his heel and left the room to wait upon his Imperial master.

Volgus followed him, but he kept his hold upon the bar, and as he left the chamber he turned a glance full of sorrow and anxiety at the mute figures of the girls.

The prefect strode down the walk, the giant at his heels, and as he passed the line of soldiers at the gate Volgus went also. Nero stood waiting some distance below, a group of attendants about him. He had wondered at the action of his favorite, and was eager to know the meaning of the disturbance that had set his guards in such haste about the obscure house. He suspected that Tigellinus had bagged some fugitive of his hate, and for a moment thought to join in the chase. Then he waited to know further of the matter, sending for the favorite in his impatience. As Tigellinus emerged from the house, Nero recognized the great figure of the former gladiator.

"He is a fool," he said, impatiently, to Philimon, a eunuch who stood near him. "That great brute could dash him to pieces, yet he walks before him as easily as though he preceded his bride to the altar. Hath he pardoned him, I wonder, that he hath such confidence."

The words were scarcely spoken when he leaped back with a cry of alarm. The scene which followed justified his fear.

Tigellinus had paused to speak to the soldiers before proceeding down the slope.

"Guard this ruffian," he said, indicating Volgus, and waving an officer to his side. "Keep the men in place, and permit none to leave the house until I return."

But Volgus had passed the line of soldiers and now stood free without. As the officer stepped towards him to take him in custody the giant swung his bar. The men uttered a shout of warning, but it was too late; the officer fell like a log under the blow, his helmet beaten hard upon his face.

With a laugh the giant leaped away, and, darting into a narrow lane, disappeared from view.

Two horsemen pushed their steeds after him, but Tigellinus called them back.

"Halt!" he shouted; "stay, you clumsy knaves! The fellow would entice you into these lanes and beat you to pieces one by one. We can spare none at present, and that stupid fellow hath his deserts. Throw his body into the bushes by the road-side."

But the officer arose, straightening his bruised head-piece.

"He took me unawares, great prætor," he said.

"Where was thy sword?" asked Tigellinus, scornfully.

"He followed thee, my prætor, and most peacefully," protested the officer. "I thought him willingly a captive. 'Twas a treachery and not the act of a soldier."

"Thou shouldst thank the villain for his gentle blow," laughed Tigellinus. "He might have slain thee readily. No matter, since we will have a stronger score when we come to set him again in the amphitheatre. We shall not forget him."

He joined Nero, who had stood watching the scene fretfully and stamping his feet upon the turf.

"I said it," he cried, as the prefect drew near. "I told Philimon that thou wert a fool. Thou shouldst thank the gods that the weapon of that great beast did not fall upon thine own head. I looked to see it each moment as thou didst walk in front of him."

"I do so thank the gods, divine one," replied the favorite, with a smile; "but it requires something more than courage in a knave of the degree of Volgus to strike a prætor in the presence of his men. I was safe enough."

"He hath escaped for the present," said Nero. "It is well, since we may have him hunted down. What else?"

"Assuredly, we must hunt him down," responded Tigellinus. "It were worth a day of life to see him in the arena. We might match him against Caligula without a weapon. But the house yonder is full, my Cæsar. There are Fulvia and her daughters, with a batch of Christian Jews, and a hell-babe who prattles pretty things about thyself."

"Fulvia!" exclaimed Nero, in surprise. "Dost mean the wife of Lucius?"

"Truly," laughed Tigellinus; "and Myrrha, for whom we sent the centurion Rufus."

"I remember," said Nero, with a frown. "And what is this about myself?"

"A Christian child," said the favorite, maliciously, "with its little mouth full of the things that we see scribbled on the street walls. A nice babe for the end of a spear."

"Bid one of the men put it there," commanded Nero, darkly. "What of Fulvia?"

"We might defer the spear part for a time," said Tigellinus, "considering who are these women; but their presence in such company excites my suspicion. Let

us send them to the Palatine under guard, and when old Lucius comes for them we can explain how we took them in custody as a matter of precaution for themselves. This is a wretched spot, and the flames will drive many ruffians across the river. They are unguarded, these women, and if they are held until our return we will have, meantime, opportunity to think of the matter."

"So order," said Nero. "We owe old Lucius something, and reference to him wearies me. Hasten, for I am hungry and would reach thy country-place."

Meantime, the inmates of the cottage were filled with dismay.

"What will he do?" asked Myrrha, when Tigellinus had departed with Volgus.

"Ay, what will he do?" asked Ruth, clasping her hands. "Unfortunate angel!" she exclaimed, drawing Mary within her embrace. "Didst hear what the wretched man said to thee, and how thy foolish words lighted his devilish malice? Ah, Gabrial, my own, what is it that will come to us?"

"Peace, and be comforted," said Fulvia. "I am not yet without power, and I think we can protect thee. The time was when the wife of Lucius could have frowned this insolent ruffian to his knees."

"Alas! it is not so now, dearest mother," said Valentina.

"We have in no way offended," said Fulvia. "What is it that Cæsar can say? If Volgus fought his soldiers in our house, 'twas the home of Lucius, and Volgus was our freedman. Let the charioteer come again."

"Do not anger him, mother," pleaded Myrrha.

"They are fighting," said Gabrial, from the window. "Volgus hath broken away."

"Again!" cried Myrrha.

Fulvia rushed to his side, while her daughters looked timidly from the door.

"He is safe!" cried Myrrha. "Thank Heaven!"

"I would that we were," muttered Miriam. "The God of Jacob, of Isaac, of Abraham protect us!"

They drew fearfully within, and Gabrial seated himself by Ruth, who held the head of the child within her lap and clasped his arms about them both.

Once more they heard the step without, and the form of Tigellinus again passed through the doorway.

"I bring a message from the divine Cæsar, noble Fulvia," he said.

"Is Cæsar here?" asked Fulvia, in surprise.

"Did I not say so?" he answered. "He is below with the chariots, but is fatigued. We have had a journey of haste from the south, and the court is following more slowly. Otherwise the celestial Poppæa would be at the Palatine to greet the wife of Lucius. The news of the fire brought us forward in advance."

Fulvia did not reply, but stood looking at him fearlessly.

"Cæsar is afraid to leave the wife of his noble senator in a spot so unprotected," continued Tigellinus," and I have fears for thy gentle daughters. Alas! it hath been given to me to know how wicked are men. Disorder hath made the times fearful, and thou canst not remain in the Transtibertine unprotected."

"We have slaves about," said Fulvia. "And Lucius will return."

"Hath he been here?" asked Tigellinus. "And with these Jews? Truly, they are strange clients for a noble Roman. But, no matter; 'tis Cæsar's will that thou go with thy daughters to the Palatine to await his return from my country-place, whither he journeys now. The hill is safe enough, and thou shalt not lack care. When the flames have subsided thou mayst return home."

"With my daughters?" she asked.

"Assuredly," he said, with his smile of significance, bowing to the girls, who stood together. "I trust I shall not be delayed until after thy departure. The gentle Myrrha may remember that we were once friends."

"Are we not friends now?" asked Myrrha, coming forward.

"If thou wilt have it so, sweet Myrrha," he said. "I would slay myself ere I would lack in any courtesy towards thee."

"My mother once loved thee," said Myrrha.

"Thy mother always loved me," said Tigellinus, his manner changing. "Possibly she was alone in her devotion."

"Nay, noble Tigellinus," said Valentina.

He interrupted her with a bow.

"I am lost," he said, with his smile returning, "if I tarry in such company. I must depart."

"May I not speak to Cæsar?" asked Fulvia.

"It is too late," he replied, pointing through the door to where the white chariots were speeding up the way. "I have given instructions to the guard that will attend the litters which will bear thee. We found them near at hand, and have collected thy loitering slaves."

"It is well," said Fulvia. "But these people here—our clients?"

Tigellinus looked at the waiting Gabrial, silent, patient, and expectant.

"They are suspected Christians," he said. "Cæsar hath given orders that they be sent away in custody."

Ruth cowered back in the arms of her husband, and Miriam sank in terror upon the couch.

"Sent where?" asked Fulvia.

"Dear lady," said Tigellinus, his hand upon his breast, "be patient with me. Cæsar doth not always explain his commands, and I am but a poor prefect. The guard

hath orders to take them away, doubtless to some comfortable prison whence thou canst release them in thine own time."

"Thou triflest with me," said Fulvia, sternly.

The prefect stepped back as an officer entered the room accompanied by two soldiers.

"Thou needest not bind them," said Tigellinus.

"Come," said the officer to Gabrial. "Follow us, Jew."

"Alone?" asked Gabrial.

"All," was the reply.

Gabrial put his arm about his wife, when Myrrha sprang forward and clasped her neck.

"Be brave," said Fulvia, as with Valentina she bade the weeping women farewell. "We will not desert thee."

"God will not desert thee," said Myrrha. "Good-bye for a time, my true and faithful friends!"

"It is His will," said Gabrial, solemnly, pausing in the door and lifting his hand when his wife, with Miriam and Ruth, had passed from the cottage in charge of the soldiers. "No harm can come to those who trust Him. Farewell."

"I shall not wait to witness further thy affliction," said Tigellinus, who had watched with scornful eyes their grief for their friends. "Thy litters will come for thee, and the officer hath orders. I must speed after Cæsar. Farewell."

They made no response, and, with another bow, he turned and left the cottage.

XXIX

VOLGUS

THE flight of Volgus did not carry him very far. He had a contempt for his weak adversaries, and felt himself a match almost for the company. As soon as he saw that he was not pursued, he doubled back through a narrow lane, and from a place of concealment behind a clump of bushes he watched the cottage, which had been surrounded by the soldiers of Tigellinus.

"Oho!" he exclaimed, as he saw Gabrial and his family, weeping and despondent, marshalled by a guard of soldiers away in the direction of the Vaticanus bridge. "My mistress could not save her poor friends. Let us see if the prefect will dare to humiliate the family of Lucius."

His doubts were soon resolved. Immediately following the departure of Gabrial and his people, and that of Tigellinus himself, the centurion left in charge gathered together the slaves with the litters, and Fulvia, with Valentina and Myrrha, were escorted to the southward, evidently to seek a crossing at the Emilius bridge.

The ex-gladiator looked after them in a state of gloomy reflection. When they had departed he went cautiously back, and after reconnoitring the premises strode boldly to the cottage. He was still carrying the bar, and he did not fear upon his own account any soldiers that might have been left in hiding to take him should he reappear.

No such precaution had been observed, for it was not supposed that he would linger in the neighborhood, and

passing through the yard he entered the deserted dwelling. It was as still as death. The interior disclosed no sign of the sudden and almost tragic departure of its inmates. The couch, chairs, and tables were in their accustomed places, suggesting pathetically the humble members who had been torn from this spot of simple refuge to meet the fate of those who had incurred the anger and hatred of the Imperial tyrant.

Volgus looked about him, his spirits depressed, wondering whether he should remain to await the probable return of Lucius. Then he reasoned that as Lucius and Fabyan had gone themselves to the Palatine, and the course of the soldiers had been in that direction, it was likely that his master would either meet them on the way or else learn at the palace, where he might remain until their arrival, of the occurrence that had happened to them. The condition of the burning city was such that if Lucius and Fabyan should return to the cottage they must of necessity take the only course which was open to them, and cross the Tiber by the bridge over which the way of the soldiers with their prisoners tended. Then he remembered that it might not have been their design to return at all, but to go from the palace directly to the Pincian, as Fulvia and Valentina had litters, with slaves, and were in no further need of escort.

But no matter what might happen to them, whether they were in danger or not—and he suspected that they were—Gabrial, with Miriam, and Ruth, with her child, were in custody, and since Tigellinus had ordered them taken in the very presence of his mistress, they, at least, would be dealt with without pity, and after the fashion of those who were now termed Christians.

He felt the loneliness of his position, and looked about the deserted chamber with an air of sullen discontent.

Passing again into the yard, he went to the adjoining

house, where Peter dwelt with his wife and son, and knocked upon the closed door. There was no answer, and he stood dejectedly upon the stoop, his head bowed upon his breast. He had not seen the family of Peter taken; but this might have occurred before he had returned. He pushed open the door and looked in; like the cottage he had left, it was deserted. Perhaps they had fled when they had first seen the disturbance at the house so near them. He entered and called loudly, but the barren walls echoed his cry. Then he went out into the sunlight and looked towards the flaming city, his heart beating in unison with the fierce tumult beyond the river.

"All gone," he muttered. "Paul and Peter will go soon, and I doubt if I see my masters Lucius and Fabyan again. The glory of the Amici hath departed, and we have only Ahenobarbus and his minions, who love men as I used to be, and trade war with its soldiers for the massacres of amphitheatre. I should never have left it, as the bloody prefect says, but since I have I may remember something of the temper I once possessed. I am no Christian; Paul knows that. There is the sneaking Paulo yet living in the city, and that vile Calcus, whom Cainor protected at the quarters. I may pick the fellow up at a wine-shop. I can hunt for them both, and after I have cut my lord Paulo in two I will find the Gaul and pitch him into some burning house. There's sport enough to live for. After I am assured that my people are gone, I will spurn the bloody city and get away to Greece, where gladiators are yet in demand, and I may make a new record for the arena."

His eyes sparkled ferociously, and, casting away his bar, he set out at a great pace down the slope, and, crossing the Septiminian Way, bent his steps in the direction of the Janiculum bridge. He pushed through hundreds of stragglers fleeing from the flames and reached the bridge,

hesitating a little upon seeing it thronged with soldiers. His pause was but momentary, for he saw at once that he might get through in the press of the excitement, so, pushing his burly form into the mass, he shouldered his way along the rail. No soldiers disturbed him, and he reached the other shore unquestioned. To the south the flames were burning to the water's edge, but a wide space, which made up the approach to the bridge, was as yet untouched, and here were grouped countless numbers of men, weeping women, and frightened children, some staring stupidly at the fire or sitting about upon their piled-up possessions, which they had cast into the street as they had hurriedly fled from their homes, and now sought to save from the gathered ruffians and thieves about them.

There was a clank of armor near, and he felt a touch upon his arm. He wheeled suddenly to find himself upon a file of soldiers, and it was their leader, Clytes, who sought to accost him. Volgus knew him well as the centurion in charge of the beasts at the Novis Arena. Evidently he was now detailed with his men to guard the water-carriers, who were passing water in buckets from the river to the hundreds of slaves who were casting it upon the burning buildings, in a puny effort to check the spread of the conflagration.

"What, Volgus!" cried the soldier, removing his helmet and wiping the sweat from his smoke-begrimed brow. "I have seen a dozen of thy friends to-day, and they have done nobly for the poor people. Give me a gladiator for a pinch! He goes into a burning building as an idler goes into a wine-shop, and there are a thousand now in the work, each saving a life a minute. The fire has missed the quarters, so thine old home is safe. 'Tis said that the Emperor is returning, and we have had a dozen messengers from him across the bridge. They bring orders to tear away the buildings

at the base of the Viminalis; and this may stay the fire."

Volgus saw that the centurion had no intention to disturb him, and was evidently ignorant, as were his followers, of the disfavor in which he stood. He, therefore, returned the greeting with pleasure.

"Hast seen the noble general Lucius or the tribune Fabyan?" he asked.

"Nay," answered Clytes, "but I have seen one whom thou doubtless knowest, and whom they have good cause to remember. 'Tis a barbarian Briton, whom I once saw face my big lion Caligula, of which good beast he is now a neighbor."

"What dost thou mean?" asked the giant, quickly. "Speak, man!"

"I *am* speaking," replied the soldier, laughing at the sudden interest of the other. "'Tis a lad who came to the cages one morning with a party of Lucius when Caligula broke his bars. I had orders from both the Emperor and the noble prefect to keep the beast safely, yet this barbarian flourished a blade about the jugular in his throat, and each moment I thought to see him bury it to the hilt. It was a weapon long enough to reach the heart, and had it done so my own would, perhaps, have been cut out. Gods! but the young maiden was in peril, as was I, and I trembled for us all!"

"Dost thou mean Ethelred?" asked Volgus. "What of him?"

"'Tis the same barbarian name, for I heard it spoken when I took the youth in custody. He is a fair-haired Jew, with the beauty of a Greek, and he hath a courage worthy of a soldier."

"Or of a gladiator," grunted Volgus. "What of him, man?"

"I have him at the Novis Arena, safely locked behind the bars. I brought him yesterday from the Circus of

Sallust, where they had him hoarded with the vagabond Christians. Cainor, thy friend, hath charge of a section of the games, and knew of his arrest, and so looked him out for a place in the ring. He is not to be simply eaten by beasts. He is to have a sword and fight to the death with whatever foe is set against him. Cainor thought it a pity to waste so much valor, and the sub-prefect made the order. I was sent to bring him down myself."

"In truth, I know the lad well," said Volgus, thinking as rapidly as he might. "I am glad thou hast charge of him, and shall give him a word of caution as to how he may conduct himself when he comes to fight."

"Cainor will do that," laughed the centurion, who, in spite of the confusion about him, desired to talk; he had wearied of his duty and was glad to vary it by conversation with some congenial spirit. "I shall warn him somewhat myself," he continued, "but it is little good he will derive from it. His is not a case where the thumbs may turn up, for he is doomed to die for some offence. He must have angered his patrician friends, for young Paulo, who stands well with thy master Lucius, promised me a large bribe for a mean act."

"What?" asked Volgus.

"Keep it, old friend," replied the soldier. "Thou knowest these patricians as I do; they breed deviltry at the court as a dog breeds fleas. We take their money if we betray their trusts, and I, upon my part, wish my young lord Paulo among the beasts. He offered me a handful of gold if, the moment I send the Briton into the ring, I cut a leader in his leg with the sword I give him."

Volgus swore deeply. His face grew black and his eyes were like points of steel.

"Oho!" cried Clytes. "He is thy friend?"

"Ay," replied Volgus, "I am his friend. Canst let me have a word with him? On the honor of a gladiator, I will be careful, saying nothing to thy hurt."

"To-morrow," replied the soldier.

"Now," insisted Volgus. "Let me have the word and I will go from here."

Clytes still hesitated; but he knew Volgus well, and could see no harm in his request.

"I consent," he said, finally, as the giant anxiously awaited the result of his moment of reflection. "The word is 'Acte.' Give it to the officer in charge, and state that thou comest from me. He will then permit thee to speak through the bars. If thou wouldst take something to the lad I'll not deny thee, and to-morrow come when I am there. We will have a cup at the Greek wine-shop, and I will tell thee a new story that I had from a brother from Ostia. I trust by that time this accursed fire will have burned itself out."

"I thank thee," said Volgus. "Farewell."

Without further word he hurried away, pushing through the crowds of stragglers and heading for the Novis Arena. His course lay through a myriad of broken streets that had so far escaped the flames. He did not fear arrest, for he now knew that only certain officers of the prætorians had orders to apprehend him, and these were likely to be on duty elsewhere to-day. His heart was filled with the rage that he had suppressed before Clytes, but he had renewed his vow of vengeance against Paulo, and swore within his heart that he would seek him out and slay him at whatever risk or consequence. Yet, first, he desired to see Ethelred, somewhat alarmed to know of his new place of confinement. He looked backward at the seething furnace which lay between himself and the Palatine hill, where a great portion of the Subura was already reduced to embers, wondering if the flames could be checked before they would cross enough of the Campus Martius to place in danger the inmates of the cells of the new arena. But the beasts were confined there, and Nero would not permit

these costly objects of his interests to be destroyed. Already a line of soldiers was being drawn across the intervening space to destroy sufficient buildings to make a lane over which the flames could not leap.

His rapid pace soon brought him to the vicinity of the Pantheon, and, turning to the left, he passed down the broad street which led to the great entrance of the circus. He did not know the officer on guard there, but the word admitted him. Seeing him just from the burning district, the man was anxious to speak with him, but Volgus hastily entered the court, and passing across the paved way, with which he was familiar as a consequence of many visits, he reached the inner gate which was in the barred wall between the cages of the beasts. These extended on either side in the semicircle of the wall which followed the curvature of the ring. Beyond this gate was the cage of the mighty lion Caligula. The animals were restless, and a low and ceaseless growling filled the air.

"They are uneasy at the fire," explained the attendant who, answering his call, came to open the gate. "They know that something unusual is happening down yonder, and last night, when the sky was alight, they roared incessantly. The panthers have gone mad, the keepers say, and if they hold their present temper until they are turned in on the sand they will need no prodding to make them fight."

Volgus gave the password.

"Where is the Briton Ethelred?" he asked.

The man closed the gate and conducted him down a narrow lane that ran under the supporting walls of the structure.

A call from the end of the corridor halted him, and, pausing for a moment, he listened, and then turned to his companion.

"I am summoned," he said. "The Briton is in the

cell which is opposite the barred window beyond the turn in the hall. Thou canst not see the window for the angle, but it is there. It opens upon the street without. I must leave thee."

There was another hail, and, pointing with his finger down the lane, he turned and went back, leaving Volgus to make his way alone.

The giant passed down the stone hallway, and beyond the angle and opposite the window stopped before an iron door.

"Ho, there!" he cried, grasping the bars.

The figure of Ethelred instantly appeared, rising from a cot in the dark interior and coming forward

"'Tis thou, Volgus," he said. "Welcome, my friend!"

"I could pull out this door," said the giant, shaking it with a strength that made it creak in its fastenings in the stone.

"Softly," laughed Ethelred. "Thou wouldst break thy stout sinews rather. Save thy strength to protect my sweet mistress, for things are well enough with me."

"I am glad of thy cheerful heart," said Volgus. "I shall make it well with those that put thee here."

"Didst thou come to tell me that, old Christian? How is it with—"

"My mistress?" said the giant, finishing his speech as he paused, not yet familiar with the loved term which he now held for Valentina. "Don't Christian me, my Ethelred, since Paul would spoil me for the doing of these knaves that have undone my master. My sweet mistress is—"

He stopped suddenly, scratching his head slowly and with an air of confusion.

"How is it with thee, lad?" he asked.

"It is well, replied Ethelred, anxiously. "But my mistress, Volgus—my sweet Valentina—speak!"

"She was happy when I left her," said Volgus, stoutly, "barring, of course, her grief for thee."

"And she grieved for me!" exclaimed Ethelred, tenderly. "The words are sweet, and for the hearing of them I would have suffered a thousand imprisonments. Tell me of her."

"I confess that I'm puzzled," said the giant. "It is little harm that will come to her, although she has gone to the court of Nero, where she has been a hundred times before. And her mother, and perhaps her father, are with her; but this time she goes differently."

"Speak on," cried Ethelred, his anxiety again aroused by the manner of the other.

Thus adjured, Volgus told the story of the morning, softening nothing of his fears, and telling boldly of his belief that the family of his master were virtually prisoners of the tyrant. Like all freedmen, his faith in the patricians he served was boundless; they could do no wrong and were beyond adversity, but as a gladiator he knew also the power of Nero, and the name of Emperor in the ears of those who had lived at the quarters and fought in the amphitheatre was the synonym of omnipotence.

Ethelred was too little versed in a knowledge of the Roman methods to understand fully the import of the story which he heard, but he had learned enough during his stay in the capital to comprehend the fear in which Nero should be held and how likely it was that his mistress was in peril.

He groaned aloud when Volgus had finished.

"And I am penned up here," he cried, striving himself at the bars, "unable to lend her any aid but by prayers."

"She is in no immediate peril. Wert thou out, lad, it is little thou couldst do," replied Volgus.

"At least we could see the lords Fabyan and Lucius.

They will not be idle, and in whatever they might do we could lend a hand."

"Truly, if they are not themselves prisoners of the tyrant. There are cells at the Maximus, and both went to the Palatine this morning."

"Yet Nero was not there, as thou hast told me."

"Ay, but the prefect could go quickly, and fifty messengers may have been sent with orders. Thou dost not know of these things, lad. But I would thou wert out, if only to aid me. We could at least do something in revenge."

A sound now attracted their attention. It did not come from the street without, although its noises might be readily heard through the window in the thick wall. Volgus listened, his ear primed to catch its meaning.

"'Tis the guard coming," he said.

"Or the distant murmur of the beasts, who roared all through the night," said Ethelred. "They could be heard more plainly then. But, no—'tis the sound of footsteps. Perhaps it is the friend who visited me before thee. He came to the Sallust, and again last night to this place, to see that I was comfortably housed. It was the gentle Paulo."

"Paulo!" exclaimed Volgus, his face lighting fiercely. "I trust it may be he."

"Truly," laughed Ethelred, his gloom lost for the instant as he spoke. "He came to proffer his services, but in certainty to exult over my captivity. He did not hesitate to tell me my probable fate, and, lest I miss its import, went into detail as to the delightful scenes which he had witnessed in the arena. He promised me the intervention of his father to procure for me an easy death, and was full of hypocritical sympathy. I was amused and not offended since his presence broke the monotony of this solitude."

The sound of the approaching foot-falls upon the stones grew louder, and Volgus looked hastily about him. Perceiving the oval of a huge brick pillar that jutted from the inner wall into the hallway, where the shadow was sufficient to protect his form from observation, he cautioned Ethelred by a stealthy word and drew his huge bulk into it. His eyes gleamed with expectancy, and his heavy breathing was suppressed.

Almost instantly Paulo turned the angle of the wall, and, stooping, drew his shoulders down as he peered through the bars of the door.

"My Ethelred—good Briton!" he called.

"Is it thou?" asked Ethelred, calmly.

"Ay!" exclaimed Paulo, drawing away as Ethelred stepped forward. His face was smiling and his voice low, but it was impossible to miss his deep and malicious satisfaction.

"Didst rest well, my Briton?"

"I have known softer couches," replied Ethelred; "but one in prison should not be unduly sensitive. I warrant thou hadst a softer bed, good Paulo."

"Alas, yes, and I thought of thee here among the beasts with sadness, so soon to know them even better; I guessed the natural tenor of thy thoughts and pitied thee—ough!"

He straightened, with eyes starting from his head. His form was rigid, and his hair seemed to rise under his cap. Ethelred smiled at the picture of abject fear that he made, frozen to the spot, for Volgus, unable longer to restrain his rage, had stepped from his place of concealment, his brow as savage as any beast the wretched Paulo had ever seen in the amphitheatre. The young man strove to cry out, but his tongue was dumb.

The ex-gladiator sprang forward, and even Ethelred, conscious now of the earnestness of his purpose, felt a thrill of apprehension, mingled with pity, for his victim.

He called warningly to his friend, but the rage of Volgus was not to be stayed.

In his anxiety the Briton pressed upon the door, and the bolt, loosened by the fierce grasp that the giant had laid upon it, rattled from its socket; it flew open in the face of the rushing gladiator, and, halting him, gave Paulo a moment of reprieve. His startled shriek now rang through the corridor, but, too paralyzed by fear to fly, he fell helplessly upon the stones, where he lay like a death's-head as the huge form towered above him.

In a moment Ethelred stood over him, his restraining hand upon the gladiator's breast.

"Nay, my friend, good Volgus," he said, gently. "He is not worth our rage."

Volgus choked back the sounds that gurgled in his throat, the muscles like great ropes swollen about his neck. Ethelred pushed the affrighted Paulo with his foot, motioning him within the cell, and, recognizing the fact that the Briton was like to be his preserver, the young man summoned the strength and presence of mind to crawl within. Ethelred shut the door.

"I am afraid, Volgus," he laughed, "that we both need the restraining influence of the good Paul."

Soothed by his manner, the giant stood passive.

"And *he* is the prisoner now," said Ethelred, indicating the crouching man within. "I would that we might keep him there."

"Ay, for I promised Clytes," muttered the ex-gladiator, as he recovered speech, "to do naught to injure him."

"To injure Paulo?"

"Nay, to injure Clytes, as officer of this place. Ah, I have it!" he shouted. "We shall serve this young man properly."

"What is it?" asked Ethelred.

"He shall remain a prisoner, I promise thee. Nay,"

he continued, as he essayed to enter the cell and Ethelred still restrained him, "I'll not hurt the knave."

He entered and seized a small wooden stool that sat near the couch, the only seat which the narrow den afforded, and, springing into the hall, mounted to the window. The stool enabled him to stand at a height that permitted him to exert his strength against the bars, and two of the rusty pieces were torn from their fastenings.

"Up with thee, lad," he said to Ethelred. "Thou wilt be outside in an instant, and the street is safe. Each passer-by will sympathize with a fleeing prisoner, and if thou art seen thou needest not fear."

Ethelred immediately understood, and, aided by the stout arms of Volgus, drew himself to the ledge of the window and looked without.

"It is safe," he said, his head through the aperture. "There are none about."

"Drop to the street and wait for me," said Volgus. "I will lock this smooth Paulo within and go by the street. Trust me to tell the officers some fantastic stories, and I promise thee they will be believed."

"Thou wilt not harm Paulo?"

"Nay, trust me," laughed the giant, now in an excellent humor. "I'll not put a mark upon his pretty skin. Haste thee."

Ethelred disappeared through the window, and the giant heard him alight. He called softly and was answered, and then turning to the barred door he pushed it shut, and with the haft of his dagger drove the bolt again into its place in the stones.

"Farewell," he said, pausing to look again at the crouching man. "Thou wilt need thy father to release thee."

Paulo heard his gruff laugh with a feeling of deep relief, and he disappeared up the corridor towards the

entrance. Ten minutes later he joined the waiting Ethelred without.

"Thy friend is in trouble," he said, "and the keepers in consternation. I told them that Paulo, because of his friendship for the family of Lucius, had connived at the escape of the Briton prince, who had escaped through the door with a false key which the Lord Attilius had procured, and vanished through the window, broken by his slaves without; that to screen himself, he was locked in the cell, and that I refused a large bribe at his hands to conceal the secret which I discovered. My lord Paulo is now in sore trouble."

"Will thy story be believed?" asked Ethelred.

"It is as good as any," laughed Volgus, in great glee. "Thou dost not know these keepers. Whether they believe it or not, it is a story to their own account, and which they may tell to clear themselves. Having Paulo safely in the cell, they will surely keep him there, and his father will take him out only on an order from the subprefect, or, perhaps, Tigellinus himself. Mayhap"—and the giant laughed again—"Tigellinus, who hath a humor of his own, may make the young knave play out the rôle, which, after all, will be a justice higher than is often meted out in Rome."

"Whither go we?" asked Ethelred.

"First to get thee a weapon, and then to a place of safety, where we may debate as to our conduct," replied Volgus. "Let us hasten."

Ethelred followed, and they left the broad way and plunged into a series of narrow streets in the Campus Martius.

XXX

A POMPEIAN PRISON

FOR once in his career of crime the limitless power of Nero was put in peril. His capital was a heap of ashes. Two-thirds of the giant city had been scorched to death. From every side arose the wail of its afflicted population, and curses, both deep and loud, arose against a ruler who was callous to their sufferings, if not responsible for their grief. They had heard that from the Tower of Mæcenas he had sung and rhymed to the flames, and stories, like the sowed dragon's teeth, sprang up to threaten him. His ministers were appalled at the ruin that had been wrought, and Seneca, apprehensive for the safety of the Palatine, implored him to take some measures to relieve the prevailing distress. But the fears of the tyrant enveloped him as the flames the distracted city, and for a time he was incapable of action. It was not so with Tigellinus; equal to even this great emergency, he set about the bringing of grain from the storehouses of Ostia, and ordered the Imperial gardens thrown open to the public. Tents were erected in the groves, and money distributed with a lavish hand. The price of bread was reduced by Imperial decree, and Seneca and Malito drew upon their personal resources to aid the hungry. This, in part, mended things, but the public spirit sought revenge; victims were needed to expiate a crime of which it was certain. The genius of the evil prefect found them. The culprits were the Chris-

tians; *they* were the incendiaries who had fired Rome, and placards were posted through the districts that remained intact calling upon all classes to report them; that sect among the hated Jews, of which all evil had been previously told, in malice and revenge had perpetrated this crime of crimes. The popular mind, already frenzied, was quick for such a rumor, and the authority of the Palatine made it sure.

Nero was aroused by this awakened sentiment. He went forth at the head of his train to visit the temporary hospitals and distribute alms. He promised also a summary vengeance. Every suspected Christian whom his soldiers might take should be sacrificed to the people in the amphitheatre. They were doomed before, but now, resting under a double curse, pity was to become a public offence. The games should be without parallel in previous history, and the resources of the entire empire should be taxed to deck this second holocaust.

Fabyan and Lucius both were prisoners. Their exalted station was no longer of avail. Taken at the palace, they had been held to await the disposition of the tyrant, and the desolation which prevailed during the fire made their detention possible without scandal. The consternation which followed the disaster prevented either comment or revolt. Their stricken kindred were speechless in the presence of the prevailing terror, and trembled for themselves in their various households. The conspiracy of which Brabano had been a part crumbled like a rotten house. Upon the reaction the power of Nero rose like a triumphant wave. Uncle and nephew, general and tribune, were confined in the cells of the Palatine, and Fulvia, with her daughters, were also prisoners, with whom communication was forbidden. While all were in the depths of despair and saw neither hope nor relief, they were comforted in the thought that Berenice was beneath the same great roof of the palace,

and that Brabano was also near; upon them was now their sole reliance.

Gabrial and his family, the patient Ruth and her sister Miriam, were without even these resources of hope. Cast into the cells of a prison, just beyond the burned district in the Campus Martius, they were herded with the noisome crowd that filled the place following the fire. Every manner of malefactor had been thrust into this foul retreat, and the hearts of the poor women sickened with the horror that had come to them. Their lives had been humble, but they were cleanly and pure, and, though often oppressed, they had never suffered disgrace or privation. Now they were called upon to endure the extremes of both, for the fare was loathsome, and the frightful surroundings terrified their gentle souls. The child Mary was overwhelmed. Vainly she called for her father, beseeching her aunt to tell her the cause of their misfortune, and begging to be taken from the place. Her words were agony to their bruised hearts, but they were powerless and could only weep. Together they huddled upon the stone floor, shrinking from the brutal ruffians that thronged the corridors jesting with the coarse soldiers, coarser because they were the guardians of a jail, and subjecting the helpless women to every insult and indignity. Gabrial was not present, even to offer the poor protection of his relationship; he was confined in a separate department of the prison.

It was here that Paul and Peter found them. These brethren in a now common fate had scarcely time for slumber. While they were creatures of sanctification, they were yet in the flesh, and God imposed upon them its limitations. Yet to this extent only were they rebellious, begrudging the necessary hours for food and rest. Peter was old, but the arm of Paul was stout, and the spirit of both was dauntless. As misfortune thickened on every side, and the children of their teach-

ings were hourly thrown into the dungeons, they gathered an energy greater than the energy of their foes. They left the hospitals where they had knelt beside the sufferers of the fire and went to pray with the sufferers for their faith. Supported by his staff and the strength of Paul, the aged disciple, his sweet face aglow, passed with tottering feet down the path of trial that led so surely to the end of his pilgrimage. Martyrdom was no less certain for the sturdy man beside him; but there was in reserve for him a glow of light for the heart, like that which their presence carried into the prisons they visited. The jailers knew them, but the soldiers stayed their hands; their course marked for detection the brothers whom they visited, and as their fate was sure the authorities, with evil wisdom, delayed their arrest.

It was outside the walls of the Pompeian prison where Gabrial was confined that Volgus and Ethelred met them, two days following Ethelred's escape from the Novis Arena. The ex-gladiator and the youthful prince no longer lay in concealment. The fate of both Lucius and Fabyan was known at their respective houses, and to these men of courage the necessity for seclusion had passed. They were willing now to fight all chances, and run any risk to communicate with their friends. If they should not be saved their fortunes might be shared, and this Ethelred had determined to do. His separation from Valentina distressed him, but he was not alarmed for her safety; it was rather her father who was in peril. He could not find it within him to believe that there lived a man, emperor or prefect, who would lift a hand to harm the person of one so beautiful. She was at the palace, and hence suffered no hardship beyond grief for her parent. The Briton had dared many perils, and, being young, hope sat with youth high in his breast. Volgus carried a different mien, but it was none the less sustaining to his companion; the strength and courage

of the great ex-gladiator, combined with his incorrigible recklessness, laughed at all obstacles.

Paul saw them as they passed the entrance of the prison, and, hailing them, stood with Peter until they came together.

"Oho!" cried Volgus, his gruff and customary greeting; "art thou free, good fathers? Have the gatherers for the games left thee out? In these days of fire and deviltry we should be thankful for all mercies from the Palatine, so few are left."

The Apostle noticed his changed manner.

"Welcome," he said. "Thou and we are left."

"Ay, but for how long?" laughed the giant. "Thy time will come, and perhaps mine after I have shown them a foretaste of what is left in me. But they have made good headway with my people."

"The Lord's people," said Peter.

"He takes poor care of them," observed the ex-gladiator, dryly, unmindful of the look of Paul.

"Hast thou news of any sort?" questioned Ethelred, anxiously.

"Some little," answered Paul. "I went at an early hour to meet with Brabano in the gardens of the palace. A trusted servitor in his employ admitted me, and we conversed in secret. We prayed together in the grove."

"Prayed!" laughed Volgus, hoarsely. "I would we had an opportunity to fight."

"Thou hast the opportunity," said Peter, gently. "We have been fighting as men have seldom fought; we are fighting now. Look at us."

"Truly," said Ethelred, as he noted their wearied and dust-stained appearance; "thou hast, indeed. God's blessing on thee!"

The disciple laid his thin hand upon the youthful shoulder. A warm light was in his eyes.

"'The prayers of the righteous avail much,'" he said.

"How much?" asked Volgus, coarsely. "Canst thou pray my master and my sweet mistress out of the clutches of the redhead? Do so, and I will make a renewal of the faith. In this life benefits are measured by what we get."

"So true a thing thou hast not said in all thy days," observed Peter, in his kindly voice. "In this life it is so; and mayst thou remember to give it a true meaning in some future hour of sober thought."

The earnestness of his manner had no effect upon Volgus, but the countenance of Paul fell. He looked gloomily at the colossal figure before him.

"They had Moses and the prophets," he muttered, "and—"

"Nay," said Peter, the smile again shining upon his face. He lifted his arm, and this time laid its length across the shoulders of his companion; his embrace was loving as he drew his ear to his lips. "Have thy memories gone, dear Paul?" he murmured, "in the labor that wearies us now? Does the spirit faint in the love we hold for those who disappoint us, and do the clouds obscure the star? Blessed be the Christ that loveth him who stumbleth, because he knoweth the heart and hath the hand to save!"

Tears moistened in the stern eyes of the great Apostle as he turned them swimmingly upon the beloved face. His form stiffened like iron under the tenderness of the disciple's touch.

"It is good to see thee, Volgus," he said.

"Ay," replied the giant. "It is good to see thee, fathers. Thou mightst chasten a man not a gladiator, but I am through with thy creed; keep thy prayers for thine own comfort. I have different ones; I am praying to lay my hands upon a certain sneaking Calcus, who is a

Gaul. When I have pulled off his head, I shall take his trunk and beat with it to death a certain Paulo, whom I shall find in some spot where there will be no good Ethelred to stay my hand. Ay, and I shall not have to remember my word, given on the honor of a gladiator to one Clytes, whom I may not get in trouble. I would not barter the pleasure of such a thought for all thy dreams of heaven. The sight of this prison and the danger of my patrons make me mad."

Paul looked with some wonder towards Ethelred, who had essayed to stop the violent speech of his comrade; but the great person of Volgus indicated nothing.

"The sight of this prison may afflict us all," said Peter. "Shall we go in?"

"Is it safe?" asked Ethelred, glancing at Volgus.

"Anything is safe for me," laughed the ex-gladiator. "The soldiers seem to forget that I have been published; memory is short, and the fire has burned out the placards. They were posted only in the Subura, and that is gone. Besides," and he laughed again, "they look at me, and that helps them forget."

They entered the gloomy portals. The guard admitted them without question, fastening by manacles their hands together, so that they walked in pairs. Their bonds were to be released when their visit was terminated and they presented themselves again at the entrance. Paul and Peter were bound together at the wrist, and Volgus and Ethelred, likewise manacled, the guards laughing as they made fast the giant.

Passing down the long corridor, they found at its end a large stone chamber which contained their friends, Ruth and Miriam, with some companions who were Christians; they had discovered each other in the press of criminals with whom they were herded, and sought this spot of greater seclusion where they might pray and commune in peace.

They welcomed the coming of Peter and Paul with exclamations of joy and with tears.

Ruth was holding Mary in her arms, seated upon a stone bench, beneath a small barred window, which admitted light and air into the apartment.

Releasing the child to Miriam, who was beside her, she fell upon her knees and clasped the robe of Paul.

"Gabrial, my Gabrial, dear friend!" she cried. "Gabrial of my heart! Canst thou do nothing? May I not see him?"

The Apostle stooped over her, whispering words of comfort. Mary slipped also to the floor, coming forward and clutching at him eagerly.

"Help my mother, good Paul," she said. "She has wept all through the nights. She will die, Aunt Miriam says, unless my father comes. May we not see him?"

"I bring to thee, child, the father of the fatherless," said Paul. "When thou art older thou wilt understand!"

"Will she be older much?" asked Ruth, sadly.

"*Thou* art free!" exclaimed Miriam, bitterly. "*Thou* hast not been confined in this awful place. 'Tis thy teachings that have brought us here, and it is for thy creed that we die."

"Hush, woman!" said Volgus, reprovingly.

Ethelred swung about and stared at his companion in astonishment, but Paul said nothing.

"Nay, dear sister," said a man standing near. "'Tis not for the creed of Paul that we suffer. If under his teachings we are now afflicted, we owe him much. But I heard the word before he gave it, and bless God that I am deemed fit to give it the testimony of my life. Is this our courage?"

"I am ashamed, Linas," said Miriam, looking tearfully at him. "There are women here who have sustained even the men. I shall fail no more."

"Nay," said the Apostle, "weep as thou wilt, so that

thou still trust the Lord. God grant that I may remain free so long as I have strength to do His will and comfort His afflicted! Had I my poor wish, I would share the sufferings of all."

Volgus drew Ethelred to the door as he spoke to a man in the corridor. The fellow listened with a flush of pleasure, and then hurried away to the entrance, where he might find a superior. The ex-gladiator had proffered a request, and a man who had won the honors of the amphitheatre was one to be honored by a jailer. Patrician and prefect might fall by the way-side, but he who amused the Roman populace, in the plebeian mind remained always great.

"Volgus hath asked that Gabrial be sent to this part of the prison," said Ethelred, when they turned again to the others. "I trust it may be done."

"There is little reason why it should not be done," said Volgus. "And I have asked it as a comrade and a fellow-at-arms."

Ruth stared at him with eyes that were full of joy and with lips that were dumb. The Christians gathered about her in expectancy, scarcely daring to interrupt the silence that had fallen upon them all in the presence of her anxiety and suspense.

This was shortly broken by the coming of Gabrial himself, who was ushered through the hall and pushed into the chamber.

"I thank thee, comrade," said Volgus, gruffly, to the man who had accompanied the prisoner, and who now smiled with pride. "It was a true act."

Gabrial had clasped the fainting Ruth to his breast, and they mingled their tears together as their joyful friends stood about them. Then he greeted Miriam and the others.

"I have been ungrateful," sobbed Miriam, sinking upon the stone seat.

"Peace," said Ruth. "Let us joy that he is here. Now that thou art with me, Gabrial, I shall not be frightened. Since I have been separated from thee I have learned the sustaining strength of thy presence; I know now that I can go fearlessly in thy company to death. If thou wilt let me hold thy hand even the amphitheatre will have no terrors for me."

"Do we go there?" asked Miriam.

"In truth we do," said Gabrial, sadly. "I have learned it without doubt. None will be spared, and I pray Heaven that we suffer nothing worse than the beasts."

"Oh! oh!" shrieked, Miriam, giving way for a moment, her hands clasped to her face. "Who is there to hold *my* hand."

"I will," said the child, stealing to her side. "I will hold thy hand."

The huge gladiator looked upon the scene with strange eyes.

"And I," said Linas, speaking to them. "I am alone, and there are none for me to comfort. Let us both hold the hands of the child together."

"These are bold people," said Volgus to Ethelred, after a moment of reflection. "I remember when the amphitheatre had terrors for me, and that with a good blade and a stout shield before me I once fought a batch of leopards that had each a dozen lives. It seemed as though they would never die, and I remember that I was afraid."

"Thou didst lack something," said Ethelred, "which I somewhat lack myself. Perhaps we may find it together."

"'Tis a sad joy to be with thee once more," said Gabrial. Then his eyes fell upon Mary.

"There is the pity," he said to Paul.

"Wouldst leave her?" asked the Apostle, "when Christ awaits thee beyond?"

Gabrial turned his eyes heavenward.

"'Tis a sorrowful world," he said. "Let it be as God wills."

"We must go," said Peter, finally. "There be other prisons."

They parted tenderly from their friends, and when they were again outside they stood together before the entrance.

"Whither goest thou?" asked the Apostle.

"We have a safe lodging near the barracks," said Volgus, "where I can conveniently look for my Gaul. He is warned, however, and keeps within the quarters, or the ranks. He is afraid to run again to the soldiers, for Cainor hath forbidden it; but I would not give the chief promise to hold my hand—no, not for the post he holds himself."

"Wilt thou see the noble Brabano again?" asked Ethelred.

"To-morrow at the dawn," said Paul.

"May I go with thee?" asked Ethelred, eagerly.

"Ay, we may both go," cried Volgus.

Paul smiled.

"We should carry some tumult to the palace gardens, good Volgus, if thy familiar presence went near there. Our meeting is a secret one, and I assure thee 'tis full of peace. But Ethelred may go; I am sure Brabano would have it so, and he can bring to thee such news as we may learn."

"Where shall we meet?" asked Ethelred.

"At that same gateway where thou saidst thou sawest Marcus," replied the Apostle. "Thou seest I have remembered."

"Where may we find thee and our Peter, good Paul?" asked the giant. "We have missed thee, surely, of late."

"Is it so?" observed the Apostle, his eyes turned upon

him. "Thou canst find me at the burial-ground of which thou knowest, where nightly our meetings are continued. Thou wilt be welcome ever. But come, good Volgus, I beg of thee, before thou hast found thy Gaul."

He turned to give his arm to Peter, and together they went slowly up the street, while Volgus, his countenance thoughtful at the Apostle's words, walked with Ethelred towards their lodgings.

XXXI

THE FALL OF BRABANO

IT was yet dark when Ethelred appeared at the gate of the Imperial garden upon the Palatine, where he had made his rendezvous with Paul. He had reached the place undisturbed, even in the confusion which kept the small hours of the night in an uproar for many weeks following the fire. But this was a portion of the city reserved to the privacy of the Imperial palace. A few loiterers were abroad, but they were not inclined to molest him; it was a region of the patricians, and, whether returning homeward after a night of pleasure or abroad for adventure, they were not likely to be unattended or without aid within call. A marauder who would accost such a personage at such a time knew his fate, and had the caution not to attempt it. It was not here that the populace had been housed immediately succeeding the conflagration; they had possession of the gardens lower down the slope, separated from this spot, sacred to the ladies of the Empress and the immediate inmates of the palace, by an intervening wall which barred all entrance. As early as was the hour, Ethelred found that the Apostle was there before him, and as he drew near he observed in the uncertain light the quiet figure waiting at the stone column of the gate.

"Welcome!" was the greeting extended to him. "There is a soldier within, but he is an attendant of Brabano. We are to use caution for the sake of our friend. Come, let us go without delay."

The young man followed as he pushed open the gate, and they entered the garden together. The soldier came from the shadows to meet them. Paul motioned him to proceed, and he led the way under the fragrant branches of the trees, yet moist with the dew of night. Their course lay towards the palace. Ethelred surmised that the soldier was necessary, not only for guidance, but in case they should meet any of the palace following.

After a walk of some minutes they stood in the darkness of a deep grove, evidently remote from the broader ways of the park. Their attendant here left them. He was mute, soft of foot, and had the practised caution of one familiar with the duty he had performed. They acquiesced in his secrecy and forebore to question him.

"Brabano will come presently," said Paul, breaking the silence they had maintained during their walk. "We have often met at this spot."

Ethelred could not suppress the question that rose to his lips.

"Why?" he asked.

"For prayer," answered Paul, "and that communion which the good of our people demands. Many are in sore straits, and Brabano hath much power to aid them. He brings me money for their cause. I have told him of the churches which are established abroad, and through him I have sent them letters. Were he destined to live he might preach the faith with noble power. That is with God."

"Is he not destined to live?" asked Ethelred, in surprise.

"He thinks otherwise, and, again, he hath duties here. Already he hath helped us, as I have said."

"I have wondered at the meeting at this hour," said Ethelred, his curiosity not to be suppressed. "Surely,

one so powerful as Brabano could see thee at his will. It is different at home with all who are attached to my father's person."

"Thou knowest how the Christians are held here," replied Paul. "Even Brabano could be endangered now. We shall not be seen as we depart. Our way lies through a gate in the wall which leads to the lower gardens, where we may mingle with the throng unnoticed. But such a way is not safe for entry; we might be seen and followed."

As the garden was now lighted by the first flush of dawn, the young man could observe the exceeding beauty of his surroundings. The shadows made the hanging vines like curtains of velvet, and wave after wave of dusky lace encompassed them. Here and there the white gleam of marble shone through the openings in the folds of sombre color, and the murmur of fountains, as they began to play, fell softly upon their ears. As the light widened the grove became brilliant with flowers, and the song of the awakened birds filled the air with a tender melody.

" 'Tis a grove of paradise!" he exclaimed.

"The morning is beautiful anywhere," said a voice at their elbows, startling Ethelred by its abruptness. " 'Tis to me the best hour for thought."

Brabano had approached them silently and unobserved. He pushed aside the drapery of ferns that had concealed his coming, and stepped into the open space of the walk. "A fair greeting to you, brothers."

" 'Tis a youthful Briton, our friend, Prince Ethelred," said Paul. "He begged to learn without delay of the daughter of Lucius, and I have a sympathy for the impatience of the young."

"He is welcome," replied Brabano, as he grasped Ethelred's hand. "My attendant described his presence, and I knew who accompanied thee."

"He hath sharp eyes, thy attendant, in such a light," laughed Ethelred.

"Sharp eyes are sometimes a necessity," observed the other, slowly. "Wilt thou ask the blessing of Heaven upon us, good Paul? We will bow together."

They sank down upon the sanded walk, under the trees, the Briton kneeling also. They did not speak aloud, but the heart of the young man was fervent with the thought of Valentina. Then they arose.

"Hast thou word of Lucius?" asked Paul.

The physician sighed. He was impressed with the solemnity of his prayer. The change that had come to his ambitious and dominant nature yet bewildered him.

"What is it?" asked Ethelred, anxiously.

"I have heard nothing from Nero, but the Empress hath knowledge of his designs," replied Brabano. "Lucius, with his family, must die. Fabyan may recant and suffer banishment. 'Tis a concession because of his strength with the prætorians. Nero would not grant it but that Tigellinus is cautious."

"Lucius to die? Is this true of Valentina, his daughter?" gasped the young man.

"And the other—the sweet girl of his nephew's heart—what of her?" asked Paul.

"He would not harm them?" cried Ethelred, his voice broken. "This Emperor is yet a man!"

"He is as a man possessed of a devil," replied Brabano, with bitterness. "But I am not without hope. The heart of the Empress hath been touched, and she will speak. Her health is poor, and she is listening to the word."

Paul's lips moved silently.

Ethelred essayed to speak again, but Brabano lifted a warning hand. His ear caught a sound, near and distinct, and he stood with his keen senses alert, listening intently.

"So soon," he murmured.

Instantly the cause became apparent.

A dozen men appeared at various points about them, and a centurion stepped from behind a cluster of bushes fronting the grove.

All were immediately conscious of the meaning of this scene, but neither betrayed fear. The countenance of Brabano, as a fleeting shadow, disclosed his surprise, but he was erect, silent, and stood with all of his accustomed haughtiness to await the word of the officer.

"Thy pardon, my lord Brabano," said the centurion, who was Rufus, and well known to him. "I have orders to arrest thee, and take thee to the private audience chamber of the prefect."

"My arrest—the prefect—from the Emperor?" said Brabano.

"No, my lord. From the noble prefect."

The physician smiled ironically.

"To arrest the physician of the Emperor—of Cæsar?" he asked.

The centurion was silent.

"Speak, sir," commanded Brabano.

"To arrest the persons I should find in this grove," replied the officer.

"If thou hadst found the Emperor here," questioned Brabano, "what then?"

The centurion moved uneasily.

"Thou wilt not hold me for what may be found an error," he said. "I am a soldier, and have my orders. Pity me, my lord."

"What is his duty?" asked Paul of the physician.

Rufus looked gratefully at the speaker, but Brabano did not reply.

"Dismiss thy men," he said to the centurion. "We will accompany thee."

The centurion hesitated, but shook his head.

"Come, my friends," said Brabano, turning to his companions. "The officer will do his will with us."

The centurion flushed slightly, but motioned his escort into line. He took his place by the side of the physician, and, followed by Paul and Ethelred, together they passed from the grove and up the broad walk leading to the entrance. Then they filed into the marble corridor of the palace.

The slaves who were about at this early hour fell back in astonishment before the startling spectacle, and looked their amazement into one another's faces. A dozen flew swift-footed through the hall, and Brabano knew that his hour of humiliation had come, and that the Palatine would be awakened by the noise of his fall.

As early as was the hour, the prefect was awake. He had feasted upon the preceding night, but had drunk little. His brain was busy with a matter more momentous than he had usually to meet. He thought upon it deeply.

Brabano had been cautious; but the spies of Tigellinus were always alert, and he had learned of the morning meetings in the grove. At first he had suspected an intrigue and laughed; but he recognized its import when he learned who came to the garden. Money had been paid, and this threatened a conspiracy. Instantly every secret agency was set to work, and he was soon armed with a knowledge of the truth—Brabano was aiding the persecuted Christians. Poppæa had sickened until her decline was serious; Nero was frightened. Tigellinus suspected poison, and with the conception came a shock that startled him by its gravity.

He knew the physician. His own power was limited only by the petulance and caprice of his master, but Brabano had a power of his own. He feared Brabano. The physician was the only man who aroused such a sentiment within him—he who fancied himself above all

fear. He grappled now with a problem that baffled solution.

If Brabano was treacherous the very walls of the palace were shaken and unsafe. He might be put to death, and that by a stroke of such swiftness as to cut his designs asunder, but the dark prætor feared some venom from his tomb—he would leave some malignant imprint upon the palace floor that would breed revenge upon those who might destroy him. *This* was the respect which the forceful nature of the physician had inspired in the fierce mind that knew him — a mind that shrank from an intellect that had compelled respect, and which carried an influence beside which the fiat of a Cæsar was impotent.

But the prefect knew that the very gravity of this event forbade all negligence; he must meet and conquer it, or he was lost. He thought of compromise, but cowered from it instantly. His methods were not to trust, but to strike. In compromise he was overmatched, and once in the toils of an arrangement he was helpless. His rage rose with his perplexity, and, for once, he paced his chamber ceaselessly through the night, drawing upon all his courage. Eagerly he waited the morning and the arrest which he had ordered the centurion to make.

The dawn came at last to his impatient fancy, and with it the hour for which he waited. The light had quickened until he knew that his soldiers had either struck or failed, and then he heard the sound of their marching steps without. The noise rang loud upon the marble of the flags, echoing through the corridor in the early morn. There was a rattle of arms in the small audience-chamber which adjoined his apartment, and his private door opened to admit his slave. Rufus followed.

"I have them, my lord prefect," he said. "One is the noble physician to the Emperor."

"And the other?"

"There are two others, noble prefect. One, a Jew, and the other a barbarian—a Briton."

"Three," he said, thoughtfully, as to himself.

The news seemed to lighten his task for some reason known to him. He arose to meet the man before whose cool eyes he knew he must wear a mask of steel.

The three stood together in the centre of the chamber as the prefect entered. The soldiers were without.

Tigellinus paused and inspected them silently. His confidence returned as he took upon himself the power of his office. Countless times he had faced the victims of his duplicity or wrath, and the rôle was familiar; but as his gaze continued steadily upon the motionless figures he felt his resolution wane. He covered the weakness by a frown, and thickened his voice angrily.

"How is it, noble Brabano," he said, "that thou art brought into my presence like a common thief, captured at night in the gardens of the palace? Who are these people that bear thee company?"

The physician continued motionless and silent.

"Answer," commanded Tigellinus.

"To Tigellinus, or to the prefect?"

"To both!" thundered Tigellinus.

"Thy second question only," replied Brabano, coldly.

"This is Paul, a preacher, whom thou hast met. The other is a prince of Brittany."

"Whom thou hast also met," supplemented Ethelred, smilingly.

Tigellinus glanced at the young man for an instant, and again addressed Brabano.

"I have had notice of thy secret meetings in the darkness," he said, "which for a time I have ignored. But this man is a Christian Jew whom our noble Emperor hath condemned in his anger, with all his fellows. The night is the time of conspiracy and danger, and we

of the palace must be watchful. I trust thou canst explain thy conduct."

"Readily," replied Brabano, weighing his words and delivering them with measured force. "I am myself a Christian."

Tigellinus flushed redly, and then burst into a laugh of derision. He motioned to his slave for a chair, and sinking back in it regarded the speaker with wondering eyes.

"Thou!" he exclaimed, finally. "By the gods! it is not to be believed!"

Brabano was silent again, and now, the lip of Tigellinus curled in scorn.

"A Christian!" he cried. "What magic is in this! First old Lucius, who hath gone to dotage; then the tribune Fabyan, who hath some hardness of sense, and now the court physician, our Brabano, who barters both place and life for a folly not to be spoken. Is it a conspiracy? Speak, traitor! If the safety of the noble Emperor demand it thou art not too great for the rack."

"The safety of the Emperor is not in question," replied Brabano. "I am a Christian merely."

"And thou, Jew," cried the prefect, in fury, rising and confronting Paul, "is this thy work?"

The Apostle looked upon him calmly.

"I trust so," he replied.

"Truly," said Tigellinus, his features working. "Dost know what shall be done to thee?"

The Apostle shook his head. The motion, scarcely perceptible, was slow and deliberate.

Rage made the countenance of the prefect livid.

"Listen, then," he cried. "Since thou art indifferent, thou mayst have it to bear upon thy mind. I shall float thee alive in a vat of boiling oil."

"Ah!" exclaimed Ethelred, in a mocking tone; "and

I? The rack for Brabano and a vat of oil for Paul! Have I no favor at thy hands?"

"Thou!" cried Tigellinus, startled from his wrath and looking at the defiant face turned full upon him—"thou, my gamecock! Truly, it was cruel to forget thee. Art thou also a Christian?"

"I am in doubt," replied Ethelred. "I lack so much that it requires time for thought."

Paul looked upon him with a smile.

"Thou hast some wisdom with thy courage," said Tigellinus, with evil humor. "Thy doubt may save thee."

"Nay," replied Ethelred. "I think it is not doubt that saves us. I think it is a word that Paul calls faith. As a choice between those whose hospitality I have met at Rome, I think I will call myself a Christian."

"Thou shalt have a place," said Tigellinus, motioning Rufus to his side. He whispered to him a command, at which the centurion bowed and then withdrew. Tigellinus turned again to Brabano.

"I was a fool to fear thee," he said, "which in shame I confess that I did. But, by the gods, I have mistaken! I thought thee a man of strength and deeds, but thou hast deceived me. 'Tis the heart of an ass thou hast, covered with a show of knowledge."

"I am regretful," replied Brabano.

"Nay, 'tis a lesson. I shall no more take men at their seeming. Perhaps we may find old Seneca a Christian. One knave knoweth his kind. How many others of the palace must we send to the amphitheatre?"

The tall form of Brabano in his rich robe was still erect but not defiant. He had lost nothing of his dignity.

"Thou proceedest with some haste," he said, quietly. "I shall speak with Cæsar."

"Nay," laughed Tigellinus; "thou wilt speak in vain.

He hath a sentiment as to those who fired Rome. It is enough that thou confessest thou art a Christian."

"I doubt the sentiment of which thou speakest," replied Brabano, calmly. "But abroad, throughout the empire, there will be such feeling. May I warn thee not to tempt it?"

The prefect's brow was black.

"Thou art doomed indeed," he said.

"And to the Empress," continued Brabano; "I may speak with her."

Tigellinus started. His eyes rolled wildly as his thoughts in rapid play flew to a channel that, in his rage, he had forgotten.

"Wait," said Brabano, observing his change of countenance. "I am to blame. It is hard to suppress the evil in our natures. I shall speak to God alone."

It was upon him now that the Apostle smiled.

"I shall speak also to thee," continued Brabano, "but nothing for myself, and in a different spirit."

Rufus appeared at the door, coming again from the corridor.

"Cæsar hath been awakened and awaits thee," he said.

"Enough," growled Tigellinus. "Take these men to the audience-chamber, adjoining his apartments, and escort there the senator Lucius, the tribune Fabyan, with Fulvia and her daughters. We will gather there happily together," he said to his prisoners, with a mocking smile. "Thou mayst console one another in the justice that will be administered to all."

The heart of Ethelred leaped at the thought of again seeing Valentina, notwithstanding their plight. Rufus came forward, and Paul and the Briton turned to follow as he directed, but the manner of Brabano changed.

"Go, my friends," he said to them. "But I have a word for the prefect alone."

"Go, thou, noble Brabano, also," said Tigellinus, still retaining his mocking tone.

The eyes of the physician flashed fire. Once more his bearing was regal and his tall form was that of an avenging judge. He lifted his arm with a majestic sweep, and, pointing his finger at the prefect, stood until the other quailed before his glance.

"If I go," he said, his voice ringing through the chamber, "and thou hear me not, as thou livest now thou art no less doomed than I. I swear it!"

Tigellinus answered him with a mien as wrathful.

"Doomed!" he cried. "Thou sorcerer!"

"To die," said Brabano, "wretchedly, ignominiously, and in disgrace!"

Tigellinus stepped back, and drew his sword from its sheath.

"I can kill thee now," he said, "swiftly and without reproach. Dost thou deny it?"

"Do it!" said Brabano, his countenance bearing its look of haughty triumph. "Do it, and set thy Germans at the palace gates, to see them fall before the gathered people like leaves tossed in the wind. Grovel here, like a penned rat, while the empire wakes in every province, and Consul and Governor set themselves towards Rome, each followed by its avenging cohorts. Cry in vain to Cæsar, who will be no less helpless than thyself, while the scene about is filled with the shouting multitude who hurl thy crimes to thy ears, omitting none. Nothing will avail thee in the presence of nine blackened districts of this Imperial City! Fool!" he continued, "thou wilt be glad to join the hapless Christians among the beasts rather than face the legacy that I shall leave to thee and the besotted puppet who is thy master!"

Tigellinus was pale with emotion. The sweat gathered in great drops upon his brow as the fears of the night

came to him with redoubled force. *This* was the Brabano that his dread had pictured.

"Leave us," he commanded, dropping into his chair and waving his hand to Rufus. "Go!"

Paul had listened unmoved by the scene, but Ethelred was filled with wonder. Delight was mingled with his surprise as he looked with admiration upon the awakened figure of the physician. He was reluctant to leave at such a moment, but Rufus pressed them to the door. As he passed into the corridor he threw an exultant look behind him, where Brabano was confronting in stern grandeur the thoughtful prefect, whose fear was visible through the mask of anger that shrouded his face.

When they were gone the fierce look faded from the countenance of Brabano, but his bearing was still severe. He looked into the eyes that met his, and his own were sombre. The thoughtful minister waited for him to speak again, which at last he did.

"Thou hast said, Tigellinus, prefect, charioteer, and knave," came slowly from his lips, his voice still vibrating with gloomy power, "that my heart is like that of an ass, which I have covered with a show of knowledge. Thou shalt see that heart, as none may hereafter know it, and I shall reveal to thee a knowledge that may be worth to thee the saving of thy wretched life. For years I have lived among thy spies, but I have had mine own. Thy time was given to pleasure, to profligacy, and vice, but I have given mine to thought. Such was my advantage, despite thy power. Dost think that time was wasted? Not a deed of the Palatine is unknown to me or unrecorded. Britannicus and Octavia, brother, sister, and wife of Nero, Agrippina his Empress mother, all of the noble race of Claudius, with two-score of patrician names, and thrice three hundred commoners, can date their fate to thee—all foully murdered. Thou wert the instigator of every crime, and each secret detail

is known. I have delved deeper. I have fathomed thy secret purposes, and know the foul ambition that mocks thy dreams. Tirelessly my slaves have written each offence, with proof and testimony, and corroborative circumstance; these endless killings, with thy countless thefts; the women who have gone shrieking to their fate, bewailing their husbands sent to death or exile; and, above all, the last, to round out the full measure of thy villany, that crime on crimes—the torch set ruthlessly to the plundered city. When I shall die, each Governor shall have a copy of this scroll, with proof in detail, and every senator; and each shall know the other hath it. On every dead wall of the city one shall be posted; each general of the army, with the centurions of the prætorian camp, shall be likewise served; and every soldier know the spot where his slaughtered kinsman lies buried. I have had time, and wealth, and thought to arrange this act against thee. Dost think, when this word shall speak in unison to every man who hath such cause to hate thee, that hell itself could offer refuge? Dost thou not know there are a thousand men who would cut their throats to follow thee? And Nero! —the maddened throng that would gather at the Palatine would pluck the hill up by the roots to crush him under it. Dost understand?"

He ceased. His foe lay quiet, looking at him with frightful eyes; he was pale, mute, incapable of motion. For a time the silence in the room was deathlike.

"Such," continued Brabano, ruthlessly, "is the elaborate preparation I have made for years; but, wretch that thou art, take heart! My pride hath burned me out and flickers like a dying torch in its iron socket. My hate is dead, and with it all schemes of vengeance. Thou hast but to breathe and thou wilt live."

The limp body of Tigellinus turned in its chair. He raised a feeble hand.

"Nay," said Brabano, his lip curling, "mistake me not, I am moved by neither pity nor regret. My ambition hath gone beyond this world, and I am moved by the passion of a new hope. If there were not behind me so many wasted years, in which I have mocked at justice and derided charity, I might save my life to preach the faith which now possesses me. The imprisoned Christians are doomed already; it is too late. Even though I stay my hand, thou and Nero would be helpless to save them from the deluded people. There must be martyrs, and I shall not blench when others are to suffer. The only service I can do the Master is to die with his more worthy children. I shall not shrink."

Tigellinus was not lacking in courage. He was crushed by the knowledge that Brabano held the means so to destroy him, and with him the entire fabric of the Palatine. He shrank from a power he could not contest with brute force, and cowered before a mind that he must respect but could not comprehend. But he was cruel and ferocious, and his spirits in part recovered under the closing words of the physician.

"Thou wilt ask something," he said. "I am sure of that."

"But little," replied Brabano, quietly. "My fortune shall be respected. I would leave it intact for those who will use it for the cause. My heirs will be Fabyan Amici and the Briton Ethelred."

Tigellinus nodded.

"They shall go free," said the physician, "and with them the daughters of Lucius. I might ask more, but my thoughts trouble me, and I stumble where I once was strong. God will pardon one so new in belief, but I would not be impious. I dare not offer to shield Paul, whose shoes I am unworthy to touch, and who hath a protector upon whose mercy I must throw myself. There is Lucius and the noble Fulvia; but they have declined

to the edge of life, and the soldier would not desert me or the others who are doomed to die, and Fulvia would hate the hand that intervened between them. There is the Princess Berenice. She is my friend, but she is not a Christian. Thou hast thyself esteemed her, and she hates the Amici. Let her not ascribe my fall to them, and in her rage influence Cæsar further against them. I have said all."

"Thou wilt hold thy hand?" asked Tigellinus.

"Truly," replied Brabano. "Among my many houses there is a secret one which contains these records. The slave who had my orders is free upon my death. He will be silent until my seal reaches him. To Fabyan Amici I will give instructions to set the torch to this house upon his going from this city, following his taking in charge my legacy. Thou knowest him fully, and he will obey my wish. Cæsar shall pledge his full protection by Imperial decree to the senate, and my death, before his going, shall make thee safe."

"'Tis well," said Tigellinus, his voice trembling. "Since thy pride makes thee a Stoic, thou mayst have thy way; but do not think that once I set my will to it I shall waver. If thou relent, I shall not; nor shall I spare thee anything when once I am assured of safety."

"Thou art assured now," replied Brabano; "it is done. I am not a Stoic; I am a Christian."

XXXII

THE CHILDREN OF MIRIAM

BRABANO had been guided in his action by a perfect knowledge of the man to whom he spoke, and also by a knowledge of the end he had in view. The house of the records might be found and his slave stopped. The hundred agents which he might set at work, and whom he had ready at the call of his purse, might be hunted down. He felt that he had asked enough, and he would tempt the situation no further. Under the spell of his presence the prefect was mute and subdued, but, once recovered, he might dare his fate. A bold man like Tigellinus, with his endless resources and limitless audacity, might find an avenue of escape from any peril. Lucius, as he had said, was old, and Fulvia was a part of him; mercy extended to one without the other was not mercy. As for himself the physician took no heed; he would not harbor for an instant a thought of his own safety to the exclusion of his friends.

He was certain that Tigellinus would keep his compact so far as he had made it, and Nero would not attempt to thwart his will. Such were his reflections as they left the audience-chamber of Tigellinus and proceeded to that of Nero. Brabano went freely, without a guard. Both knew that there was little need.

Arriving there, they found awaiting them Lucius, Fulvia and the girls, with Paul and Ethelred. They were alone. Rufus had withdrawn to the corridor out-

side, where he stood at the entrance, and Nero had not appeared.

Tigellinus said nothing, but passing on to the apartments of the Emperor, left Brabano with his friends. They greeted him warmly. Paul and Ethelred had already told of the scene with Tigellinus up to the time they had been compelled to depart. Hence they looked at the physician curiously as he entered.

"What is the end?" asked Lucius, noting his serene countenance.

"We shall not long be kept in doubt," replied Brabano, "Tigellinus is now with the Emperor, and neither loves us. Knowing them both, we should be resigned."

"I am resigned upon my own account," said Lucius; "but my heart bleeds for these dear ones whom I have no longer the power to protect. I little thought to see this day."

"'Tis a good day," said Ethelred, looking through the window upon the garden, where the sun was shining brightly. "I would we were all in Brittany together. 'Tis the same sun that lights its green hills."

Brabano smiled upon him.

"I would thou wert there with those thou lovest, my brave young friend," he said.

"If his father knew his peril, might he not ransom him?" said Lucius, his eyes upon the young man and Valentina.

"From Nero?" asked Brabano. "We have something of this world's goods ourselves, my Lucius, were ransom possible. Nay, where his hate is aroused, even Nero scorns money. We must cherish another hope."

Fabyan said nothing. He stood near Myrrha, a settled gloom upon his face. The two girls were brave. All traces of tears had vanished. Ethelred was happy in the mere presence of Valentina, and she seemingly

shared his joy. Paul stood apart, with folded arms, observing them in silence.

The door opened and Nero entered, attended by Tigellinus and two of his German guards. A chair was placed for him where he might contemplate the group, and, seating himself, he stared at them coldly. He strove to bring a look of dignity to his countenance and feign a righteous anger for the malevolence which his heart prompted. He felt little enmity towards the two girls. His hate went to Lucius, and to Paul, whose presence annoyed him. He exulted, also, in the fact that he had a patrician for the amphitheatre.

When Tigellinus had taken his place by his side, he spoke, looking upon the venerable figure of his former general with the air of a judge. His loose countenance, pallid with excesses, and his pale and expressionless eyes made him a spectre of horror to those who knew the vast power that sat with him.

"It is a grievous day for Rome," he said, with choice hypocrisy, "when our noblest soldier is found consorting with the enemies of the state, and even a tribune, whom I have honored and who has been my friend, is found among conspirators. Hast thou naught to say?"

"Nothing," replied Lucius, who realized the hopelessness of words, "if the fact that we are Christians is an offence."

"Dost thou not know so much, since I once intrusted thee with the duty of taking them?" said Nero. "Thou art without excuse, since it was the Christians who fired our city. Shame on thee, noble Lucius, to be found in such criminal company!"

Fulvia darted at him a look of defiance, but Lucius stood motionless.

"And thou, Fabyan Amici—what about thyself?"

Fabyan drew himself up proudly, looking with scorn now upon the gilded figure, abject, in spite of the

sumptuous raiment and the mask of majesty that hung about it.

"I have done nothing to deserve thy anger," he answered.

"Thou art a Christian," said Nero. "Thou hast listened to this treacherous Jew; and when I deemed thee loyal thou wert away in Palestine conspiring with our enemies. We shall look to thy conduct there when I have punished thee, and learn with whom thou hadst association. Thy confederates shall be punished also."

Fabyan laughed.

"I went upon a more harmless errand," he replied. He turned his eyes upon Myrrha. "This gentle girl," he continued, "I have long loved. She was, as thou knowest, in part an orphan, and lost a brother in her early youth. Her mother, the good Miriam, had told her much of him, and he came to be something sacred to her thoughts. She grieved as to his fate. Knowing that I would find favor in her eyes if I could bring her such a knowledge, I went to Palestine to find it."

Lucius and Fulvia looked at him with startled eyes and Myrrha gasped her surprise.

"And thou didst that for me!" she exclaimed.

The countenance of Paul expressed his interest. At the name of Miriam he looked fixedly at the speaker.

"How prospered thy voyage?" asked Tigellinus, maliciously. "Went thou to Tarsus, also?"

It was now Fabyan's turn to be surprised, and Paul's interest increased. Fabyan gazed with puzzled eyes and a look of inquiry towards the prefect.

"I went to Tarsus," he said; "and thence almost straightway to Judea. I learned nothing."

"It is not the traveller who learns it all," observed Tigellinus.

Nero was growing impatient. Aroused at an early hour, and finding the scene devoid of excitement to his

jaded senses, he longed to close it. He had gazed without emotion upon the body of his mother, whom he had ordered slain; his only expression at such a time was a comment upon her beauty. The perplexity of this doubtful group held for him only a passing interest.

"What dost thou mean?" he asked of Tigellinus, petulantly.

"Nothing," replied the favorite. "Our one-time friend, the tribune, hath an imagination. So he went not to Palestine for the pleasure of a return with Berenice."

"Is it true," asked Nero of Tigellinus, his eyes now bloodshot, "that the Princess hath also been bewitched?"

"Nay," replied the favorite. "The Princess is one after our own hearts, and therein, perhaps, our lord tribune hath lost an opportunity of gold; but he scorns good-fortune. The Princess is not corrupted, but I have grown doubtful of myself. Hence I desired the protection of thy august presence when I met these deluded ones in concert. 'Tis a sad fate they look to, but we are helpless. The perversity is theirs. I shudder to think of it," he continued, with a sigh of hypocrisy. "The people will go mad with joy to see them in the arena."

"Is it necessary?" asked Lucius. "If thou art inclined to mercy."

Tigellinus shook his head.

"It is an injustice," he said. "The Christians are a criminal and besotted class. The Imperial word hath been given that they shall be punished before the people. They are entitled to no mercy; 'tis only our hearts that grieve."

Fabyan looked at him with blazing eyes, but the prefect was untouched; he inclined to merriment.

"This Jew," said Nero, his gaze upon Paul, "we will set him up, staked, in the centre of the ring. A hive

of bees shall be placed near him, and his body painted with honey."

"A credit to thy fancy," observed Tigellinus, with a smile. "But on such a day I shall be absent—that is, unless we can place a screen about the podium."

"True," said Nero, his brow bent; "but we cannot screen the benches. It might alarm the people."

"I have already threatened him in thy name, divine one," laughed Tigellinus, while the women shuddered at his words. "I have promised him a bath in a vat of boiling oil. 'Tis a fair substitute for even a hive of bees."

"It shall be done, and I shall see it," cried Nero, his face lighting. "What of the others?"

"Art ready for judgment?" asked Tigellinus of the prisoners, with a mocking smile. "Our noble master hath scarcely deigned to look at thee, my Brabano," he said, and he turned his bold glance upon the figure before which he had so lately cowered. "How hath the great one fallen! Yesterday and thou mightst have lifted a profane gaze to an Empress; and to-day there is not a kitchen wench but would scorn to pity thee. Thou art a fool of fools!"

Brabano regarded him with a haughty smile and then looked at the Emperor.

Nero's glance lowered. He shifted uneasily in his seat.

"The treason of Brabano shall have my special thought," he said.

"Subject to the suggestions of Tigellinus?" observed the physician.

Nero flamed with rage.

"Subject to no suggestions," he cried, hoarsely. "I shall make a spectacle of thee long to be remembered."

"Thou seest?" laughed Tigellinus.

"'Tis enough," exclaimed Nero, as he arose. "I am wearied. Take them away," he continued to the Germans.

"Nay," said Tigellinus, still laughing. "Wait, august

master. I have a word for this barbarian of the long sword."

Nero paused, with a look of inquiry. Tigellinus seldom disappointed him.

"He is said to be a Briton," continued the favorite, "and, in truth, he is by adoption the son of the reigning duke—a petty dignity, but entitled to some respect. He was mad to intrust himself in Rome unattended, but his people had borrowed moneys of Seneca and the Prince came to repay them. I have learned so much by inquiry, for I met him recently, and, remembering always a face, I was put to an interest and curiosity. He is not a Briton, most noble Emperor. His father fell at Tarsus, in rebellion against Lucius, and the Prince escaped to the hills upon the homeward march of the troops. He was thought to have perished, but we see him here. An interesting story when followed to its sequel."

Ethelred stared about him, his countenance confused.

"This is recalled to me," he said, "although the scene is vague. I broke from the soldiers and wandered to the forest. Later, I was found by a tribe of Germans, who fed my hunger and with whom I grew most stoutly. In fighting with the Britons I was wounded and made prisoner. From this came my adoption by my father, who was childless; and among his people I have grown to manhood. But of Tarsus I have no memory, and my brain is filled with dreams only of the days which go before. I, too, remember faces, and that of the prefect hath strangely moved me."

"Which fact may be most fortunate for thee," laughed Tigellinus.

"How knowest thou all this?" asked Lucius of the favorite.

"I would know nothing of it but that I recognize his face, as I have said," replied Tigellinus. "Although I

was the elder, we played together in his youth. I would not speak of it save for an ancient prejudice I cherish for those who were his parents, and, perhaps, a foolish sentiment of my green days. His name was Gamil, when I knew him in Sicilia. His parents were Petria and Miriam, living once at Agrigentum. Look at him, old Lucius. He is Miriam's son, who was lost!"

A startled cry followed his words as Myrrha recognized their import. She clasped her hands and stared with a pale face at the young man who stood yet confused and puzzled before them. All regarded him with a profound interest and surprise, Lucius, Fabyan, with Fulvia and Valentina, moved by a sense of joy and tenderness; but upon Paul was the effect most visible. His features twitched convulsively, and his stern reserve was swept away. Tears filled his eyes as he yielded to a sense of deep emotion. Here were the two bright beings whose countenances, even in his ignorance, had so strongly appealed to him, now revealed as the children of his beloved sister.

The others were unconscious of his joy, and he stood calming his beating heart as his friends, forgetting for the moment their desolate condition, clustered about the reunited brother and sister, adding to their confused exclamations tender words of congratulation.

Then he drew near. He clasped a hand of Ethelred and Myrrha each in his own, his eyes beaming upon them through his tears.

"Thy mother was Miriam," he said—"the Miriam of my heart—my beloved sister. For years I have thought of her and of thee. I knew not that the Master had yet in life for me so beautiful an hour."

They looked upon him with wonder and reverence, scarcely comprehending his words, and Fabyan pressed to his side, knowing now something of the joy that moved him.

Tigellinus regarded the scene with ineffable amusement, and Nero with an awakened curiosity.

"It is strange," he said to his favorite. "Thou wert always a genius in such matters. Could we not have saved this pretty surprise until the games, and put them in a cage together?"

Brabano had stood apart, observing with unruffled countenance the happening of the moment. But at these words his frown was terrible.

"We might have done so," answered Tigellinus, observing him, but smiling upon his master. "Yet I confess myself guilty of a weakness. I once promised something to Miriam in my boyhood. She kept faith with me, as I have with thee, and I have thought to ask thee that we spare the Briton and his sister. For fair measure, and to make the party complete, we will send Fabyan with the daughter of Lucius in their company. 'Tis a pity to extinguish wholly a family once as honored, and the breed will not grow to danger in our time. The Briton counts for nothing, Fabyan was once our friend, and the girls are young."

Nero laughed.

"'Tis not mercy," he said. "I'll not believe it; it is some deeper purpose, which hath wisdom at the bottom. However, have thy way, and let us be off to eat. Thou hast my gratitude, for, by all the gods, I am hungered!"

"I will make the necessary orders of our august master," said Tigellinus to Brabano, significantly, but his manner mixed with sarcasm. "A centurion will come to thee shortly. I have spared the tribune Amici only that he may have the pleasure of witnessing thine end from the benches. I promise him a sight for the gods as well."

Assisting Nero by the arm he passed out of the chamber, repeating his mocking laughter in the hall.

XXXIII

CALIGULA REDIVIVUS

THE morning broke cloudless upon the first day of the games. Rome was aroused as never before. From every district it poured forth its numbers to the amphitheatre, specially prepared by Nero for the greatest *fête* its people ever had seen. He was to revive the glories of all preceding rulers, and to surpass them. The waning loyalty of the discontented empire was to be revitalized; he would win renewed honor in the gratification he was to bestow by this spectacle upon the populace. Each adjacent city sent its quota, and the roads were thronged with the approaching multitude. The petty dweller of the suburban country and the wine-grower of the hills came with his family, bringing provender for a week. The burned district was peopled with thousands who had erected temporary structures, and, aided by the lavish expenditures which Nero had made to relieve the people, the city exhibited a feverish activity in repairing its ruins. Money was plentiful and the crowd was happy. Troops of stately prætorians in splendid file marched through the streets, and a long procession of gilded litters and chariots bore the patricians to the games.

The vast arena, newly decorated, was a mountain of humanity, eager-eyed and filled with anticipation. The benches, tier on tier, were covered by grateful awnings, and the podium of Cæsar, with its staves of gold and its purple hangings, flashed back to heaven the splendor

of the sun. Its vicinity was encompassed by the luxuriant thousands who by wealth and station were entitled to group themselves about the person of the Emperor.

The wide amphitheatre was a plain of white, covering broad acres. The sand lay upon its level surface like a carpet of snow. Amid the great murmur of the assembled multitude, which was like the distant roaring of the surf, came the occasional thunder of the beasts below, frightened by the unusual presence of the thousands whose odors penetrated their dens, where they lay, gaunt with hunger, starved to fierceness in preparation for the day.

The attendants, in gala attire, were at their posts, the centurions in golden corselets, with helmets plumed. At the bars which covered the entrances to the inner courts through which the gladiators, beasts, and victims were conducted to the ring, stood the erect sentries. From the quarters of the fighters came the clang of steel, as shields and blades were tested. At the main entrance to the farther end, their forms dark against the white surroundings, was a significant group—their figures massive. Here towered the familiar person of Cainor, as with his comrades he surveyed the eager thousands, who scanned them in turn with an interest no less intense.

Near the podium of Cæsar and upon the right was a square which riveted attention. Every patrician eye was turned to it. It was a space, or box, draped in black, its empty seats tenantless, save by two mute figures, who sat, pale-faced though proud, upon the cushions. It was the private area by the Imperial podium, which in all the amphitheatres of Rome had been the place of distinction by right accorded to the Amici since the best days of the empire. Immediately to its rear and also hung in black, making the spaces

one to the public view, was the box of Brabano. Already the fate of the owners had been published to the throng. Depraved by custom and anticipation, they looked upon it in silence. There was no war to call for the valor of its Lucius; he had served them in the field, and they were now content to see him die in the arena. One of the occupants of the desolate spot, conspicuous by reason of the hangings in which by the orders of Tigellinus it had been draped, was known to the spectators, but the other, upright and fair-haired, with a proud and noble mien, was a stranger. One the people knew as the tribune Fabyan Amici; the other was Ethelred. They were not present at the command of Cæsar, as the crowd believed; a motive far stronger had brought them there.

Near this spot, immediately below it and to its right, was the box of Attilius the senator. Paulo was present with his distinguished father, none the worse for his brief confinement in the cell to which Volgus had tricked him, but looking with eyes that sparkled with rage at the proud figure of his enemy in the space of the sable hangings. With them were Paulina, the wife of Seneca, and Crispinella the wanton, popular yet by reason of her beauty and the favor in which she was held at court. These did not share the hatred of their young companion for the occupants of the desolate box; under the favor of Nero they knew well the vicissitudes that might await upon themselves. Even the yellow Crispinella was soft-voiced as they spoke of them.

The blare of a trumpet sounded, and then another; the echoes brought the people upright. Again it sounded, and Nero with his glittering train appeared in his podium, and, striding forward, stood with his arm uplifted to greet the populace. The mighty structure shook with the din that answered him; the fickle crowd was blood-thirsty and expectant. Any ruler for them

who was for the moment the slave of their passions, and the vast concourse in one voice proclaimed the excitement that throbbed through it.

Tigellinus, the prætorian prefect, resplendent in golden armor, stood by his master, and behind them were grouped the notables of the court. The heart of Fabyan gave a sudden bound as he looked, and he bent his head to whisper in the ear of his companion. Near the person of Nero stood a man, dark of visage, proud of bearing, and wearing a crown; at his side was Berenice. She was pale, and her beauty was still imposing, but dark circles were visible about her eyes; they glowed with an unnatural lustre, as though reflecting an inward fever. Fabyan knew the significance of her presence, and it sent to his heart a thrill of pity with all that he had to remember. The man was her kingly brother, and the coming of Herod Agrippa of Judea as a guest of the Imperial court to the games compelled her presence with the throng. She was to witness the martyrdom of the man to whom she was last and most attached, to watch with the relentless eyes of the Roman court his final agony; and while he suffered she must remember the immunity of Fabyan, and her helplessness to injure him with Myrrha. Fabyan knew that she had done with Rome, and, in spite of all he had to suffer upon his own account, he could spare a tear for the woman who had heard the words of Paul in vain.

Seating himself, Nero gave the signal, and the games were opened.

A crier entered, and passing about the circle announced the order of the various features of the day. Then the eastern gates were thrown apart, and the picked gladiators entered in solemn file. The audience was one exultant eye. Through successive generations it had been trained to this spectacle, and it lapped its great tongue like a beast in thirst.

Cainor led his band, bearing the silver sword and crowned with a wreath of laurel. He was naked save for his breech-clout, and his white body glistened in the sun. Even his helmet was thrown aside, and he bore only his shield and blade. Behind him came the tall Virgil, resolute and firm, and the fat face of Hainor, good-natured even in the presence of impending death. Melchus, the Greek, came next, and then the supple body of Calcus, the Gaul, his black eyes glowing with the excitement of the moment. He was now in the swordsman class, and the frequenters of the quarters who had seen his skill with the cestus greeted him with a cheer of delight. This was to fight for his life. Placidus the throng knew well; he was old in the arena, and time and time again they had seen him conquer man and beast alike; now his familiar figure, towering among the others, received the welcome of an old friend, which he returned by a smile upon his broad lips. Winning today he would secure the silver foil, and retire upon his honors, to fight no more.

Slowly they marched over the white sand, calm, fearless, resigned, the blood of their trained bodies answering through hot arteries the thrill of the moment, but making no sign upon their cheeks; outwardly they were at peace. They halted before the podium where sat incarnate the master spirit of every brutal passion, saluting him with the familiar cry:

"*Ave Cæsar! Morituri te salutant!*"

("Hail, Cæsar! Those who are about to die salute thee!")

The people answered them from the benches where the Transtibertine, Campanian, and Volcian matron sat with her excited family, while exultant father and astonished urchin rose to their feet.

Yet Nero was unmoved. He drew about him his Imperial garment, with its broad band of crimson, and

pushed away with his white hand the purple curtain that swung too near his face.

But there was one in the great throng that shared its emotion.

Volgus had been left to himself. He had wandered about the city freely, and since his escape in the Transtibertine no soldier had attempted to molest him. In the more important matters which weighed upon his mind, with Christian, and Brabano, and the varying moods of his master, Tigellinus had no time for a defiant gladiator. He had answered lightly the inquiry of Rufus upon the subject, and that worthy, who had held for the giant the admiration which all gladiators inspired in a soldier, had dropped a hint of this indifference to the lictors. Such word from a prætorian was enough, and although Volgus was not forgiven, he was unmolested.

He had parted without apprehension from Ethelred on the morning of the latter's going to the Palatine to keep his appointment with Paul; he knew that the young Briton was fully capable to care for himself, but as the day passed, and his friend did not return, he went forth in search of him. That evening, in a portion of the Forum Pacis which had escaped the flames, he met Marcus at a wine-shop, and there learned what had happened in the garden of the palace. Marcus was not in doubt; he had the news from a brother of the guard. Ethelred was once more a prisoner, and the ex-gladiator learned also of the fate that had overtaken both Paul and Brabano. He went first to the house of Lucius, and then to that of Fabyan, but the slaves could tell him nothing. Fabyan had not yet returned. The giant was lost in gloom; the circle was tightening about all to whom he was attached. The following day he crossed the river and went in search of Peter. The information he gained added to the depression of his spirits. The venerable disciple had been arrested upon the previous

evening, and was now in a cell at the Pompeian prison. He said nothing, but returned silently to his lodging. The day after, he was first at the arena for the coming games.

The prisoners for sacrifice were now in charge of Marcus. They had been brought from their temporary quarters in the various prisons about the city, and were held in readiness in a vast chamber back of the spoliarium; this was in charge of Clytes, while Rufus commanded the detachment guarding the entrance to Nero's podium. The gate to the arena from the prisoners' quarters was reached by a passage which went between the spoliarium and the dens of the beasts, carefully screened from either, so that the eyes of the unfortunates might not see the horrors of the one or the dangers of the other, but obtain the first view of peril in the very presence of the expectant multitude.

The ex-gladiator was upon such terms of friendliness with the centurions that he had access to all parts of the structure within their keeping. The first hours he devoted to assisting Clytes with his manifold tasks, the unloading of the sand for the spoliarium, the arrangement for the separation of the bodies, and the marshalling of the prisoners to be stripped of their possessions before their entry upon the last and final moment; with all this he was familiar. He did not go at once to his friends who were among the unfortunates. They were not to be disturbed until the closing hours, and the soldiers mercifully permitted them an opportunity to lose in sleep, if it were possible, a sense of the impending horror.

But when the throng had gathered, and the trumpet's note told of the coming of Cæsar, Volgus was first to the rail. He cast a fervid glance over the great amphitheatre and its assemblage, memories crowding fast upon him. Then the familiar figures of his friends

filed through the eastern gate and began their solemn march. How often had he been among them! How many times had he faced the great scene and stood before the podium to give the ominous salute! The little Cæsar that now sat monkey-like, despite the gaudy trappings, upon the seat of state, before which he had fought so many battles, was a child about the gardens of the Palatine when he had struck his first adversary to the sand. And he was always a victor. Etruscan, Greek, Spaniard, and German, and every species of beast had gone down before his strength and valor; and now, after he had won his honors under the hardest of Roman laws, he was a fugitive from the scene of his triumphs and must view its familiar pictures through a crack, like a rat in hiding.

No matter, he was not yet done. His eye lighted as he caught sight of the figure of Calcus in the marching column. Here was one chance for a fierce moment, and Paulo had only been reprieved. He looked and saw him sitting with his father in his box; then his gaze travelled to where had sat his patron.

Yes—he must believe his eyes! There were Fabyan and Ethelred!

But his heart sank again, for he knew all things that related to this bloody place. The box was draped with sable hangings, and some of those he loved were doomed. His thoughts were busy. Which ones? Again he looked towards the face of Paulo in the box, and the supple Calcus in the arena.

"Oho!" he cried, exultantly, "*I* am not a Christian!"

Nero had departed from the custom which had heretofore prevailed; he did not bring the beasts forward for exhibition, or devote the precious time to the tame preliminaries of marches, chariot-rides, and wrestling. He had long passed the stage when such puerile pastimes were meat for his strong taste. The exhibition of the

gladiators was all he would endure, and Tigellinus was of his mind. He had promised for every hour a sensation; thousands of fighters had been trained for this occasion, thousands of beasts had been imported, and thousands of Christians were waiting close at hand; he had the resources with which to keep his word. He and his populace should revel in blood, and the feast should be served with no ordinary skill.

Tigellinus stepped forward to give the signal, and when Cainor and his men had departed through the eastern gate, a door below the podium was opened, and a solitary figure was escorted into the arena, Two armed attendants marched on either side, the forms of the three sharply outlined against the white sand. Turning, they faced the throne of Cæsar for an instant, and then the prisoner was conducted to the centre, and the attendants left him. His arms were not bound, but he was furnished with no weapon. A written scroll had been placed in his hand, containing an exhortation to knowledge, a last mockery of his foe. Unlike the hapless creatures usually exhibited for sacrifice, he was clothed, and now in a raiment that rivalled in splendor the richest dress upon the equestrian benches. A robe of scarlet blazoned with jewels draped from his shoulders, and a golden collar was hung about his neck.

Left alone, a thrill of admiration passed through the assembly, as he folded his arms, and with face in repose looked fearlessly towards the Imperial group. Instantly throughout the amphitheatre there was a flutter of murmuring voices. His name was passed from lip to lip, for it had been familiar upon the public tongue for years. Nor was he a stranger to the scene which he now confronted; but heretofore his seat had been near the podium, high up in regal state above the curious multitude which now viewed him with such a lack of pity,

as richly clothed as at this moment he stood, a victim on the sand.

It was Brabano.

He, like the public, was ignorant of the method for his death, but already the ordeal was unusual; he was to die alone, a solitary fate, desolate amid a multitude. But his head was high, and his countenance as serene as when he sat at a feast in the Palatine, and his eyes carried almost a message of comfort to Fabyan and Ethelred, in whose faces he could see the sympathy that moved them. He glanced towards the podium where Berenice gazed towards him, fascinated as though she looked upon a spectre, conscious of a pity for him behind her terror. Poppæa was not there; she was lying ill, near unto death, at the palace.

Tigellinus had not waited for his vengeance, nor given his great enemy opportunity to relent; he had made him the first feature of sacrifice. Even before his entry through the fatal door the prefect had stood with him as he waited with his guards, looking with eyes of triumph at the preparations, his voice vibrant as he sent him "to his post of honor, the opening of the games." Now he was upon the podium, his curiosity as great as that of the humblest plebeian upon the benches, filled with hatred and an admiration for the bearing of his foe.

Upon the opposite side of the arena two slaves now emerged from the face of the wall through two small doors on either side of a grated entrance, and with ropes they let fall its bars; then they sprang rapidly back to shelter. A muffled roar came through the opening, and a great lion shot into the ring, the suppressed thunder of his voice now rising until its echoes were heard for miles. He had stopped, a confused and surprised mass, at the strange scene before his eyes. He was free, but not in his native jungle; the sand beneath his feet was as the

sand of the desert, but the swarm of beings which encircled him in a strange prospect, subdued for an instant his savage heart. He crept slowly over the white space, his heavy shoulders low, hungry, ferocious, yet bewildered.

The multitude encouraged him by a shout of joy which they had failed to give the man. His great form pleased them. He was the famous Caligula, whom the Emperor had named, and who now sat looking at him with a pleased expression upon his jaded face. In proportions the great beast justified their pride, but he must renew his savage temper if he would hold the honor of his name.

Brabano turned to survey the intruder he was to meet. This was an easier fate than he had suspected. One blow from those ponderous paws and his end had come; he would pass almost peacefully to that reward of which Paul had spoken, and which his faith now promised him. He marked the hesitation of the beast as its orbs blinked in the sunshine; it had quailed before the countless eyes that looked down upon them.

Fearlessly he walked to where the mighty creature waited; he stooped to take it by the mane, and as with a low growl it drew away he spurned it with his foot. He did not doubt its savage temper; he knew that it was to kill other Christians, and he felt for it, as for its master, a feeling of contempt and sorrow. Again he advanced, the lion eying doubtfully his bright robe; its color was of blood, but it reflected the gleam of the golden collar, and springing backward, his body yet crouching to the sand, he drew farther away.

The people stood upon the benches, waving frantic arms.

"Caligula! Caligula!" they shouted; "well named the coward! Give the man a whip and let him drive the brute from the ring!"

Many called that the patrician should be spared, and

others, who had heard something of the Christian teaching, and had learned that Brabano was perishing for his faith, stood with raised arms, their thumbs turned upward.

Nero smiled at them in derision, but the brow of Tigellinus grew black. He lifted his hand as a signal, and the soldier at his post near the gate threw down the bars. Urged by the wrath that was volleyed upon them, a dozen slaves with spears sprang into the arena, and rushed to where the slinking beast was now stealing about the circumference of the wall; his long tail was dragging in the sand, and his red eyes appealed to the derisive and shouting throng above.

But the first touch of the spear changed the scene. Its point had scarcely pierced the tawny skin when the monarch of the desert was himself in spirit. His rage transformed him, and, despite his bulk, he became a squirrel in movement. With another roar he had swung about, and though the slaves scattered like flies, escape by the entrance became impossible. No other doors were opened, for the scene was unexpected, and the frightened wretches fled in vain. Some sought to climb to the benches from which willing hands were extended, but the majority of the multitude was enraptured by the sight. The man that had made the fatal thrust was crushed to death beneath the quick paws; two more went down, torn and bleeding, under the fierce rush. The lion plunged from the arena through the entrance, from which shouts and shrieks of terror soon emerged.

There was a beast on the podium whom the officers feared more than they feared this frantic creature, and so they drove their attendants against it, to send it again into the ring. Weapons were wielded in vain; the great beast stood a company at bay, its fighting mood now on. A file of soldiers went down like puppets under its talons, and the great crowd missed the spectacle; shield and breastplate and helmet were mingled with

torn limbs and mangled bodies. The noise of the strife went to the ears of the benches without, setting the people wild as they guessed the cause.

In the centre of the arena still waited the solitary figure with folded arms; Brabano was unmindful, save in pity, of the drama at his elbow. His race was run and he had made his peace.

Within the enclosed space of the yard, between the cages and the arena, the slaves, Caligula, and the soldiers fought on. Arrows were shot into the tawny hide of the lion, and additional attendants came with heated iron bars. These were thrust against the great beast, and, mad with pain, he fled. Once more he plunged through the entrance and into the arena, now a spectacle of terror. His mane was besmeared with blood and dust, his jaws snapping furiously. As the crowd welcomed him with terrific shoutings he dashed across the sand, leaping at the waving arms upon the lower benches, and striving to fix his talons in the walls; the howling mass of humanity above him goaded his frenzy anew.

The figure in the centre of the amphitheatre no longer awed him. He saw it, as it seemed, almost as a shadow, scarcely pausing to wreak upon it his rage, but meeting it as an obstacle in his course across the arena. Fabyan and Ethelred both knew that the moment now had come, and the former, as he stood upon his feet, saw Berenice cover her face.

Then the lion sprang upon his victim, and Brabano rolled over as the paw struck him upon the breast, lying with face upturned.

His friends knew that he had died instantly.

The lion did not stop to tear or mangle the stricken form. As the shouting died away in the presence of the end, he rushed across to the entrance, and this time the soldiers did not halt him as he ran through and made his way to his den.

XXXIV

THE GREATEST DAY OF THE ARENA

FROM his place at the rail in the passage of the spoliarium Volgus had watched the death of Brabano with mingled feelings. He had shared the general excitement at the spectacle, but with a deep appreciation of the courage that had sustained the man, exalted though he was, whom he had known so well. He knew that Fabyan and Ethelred would come shortly to buy the body of their friend from Clytes, if, indeed, they had not already arranged for it, and he was not yet of a disposition to meet them. They would be overcome with grief, and, as he was powerless to offer comfort, he did not care to witness their sorrow. He desired to learn of Lucius and his family, but that could be deferred.

He left his post and went back to the chamber of the prisoners. Looking through the door, he saw them standing about in various attitudes, some divided into groups and some embracing each other with tears. Many wept silently apart, while others, upon their knees, lifted their hands and faces to heaven. Visitors were not admitted, but he went in, the guard at the door making no effort to stay him. His presence was scarcely noticed; the chamber was so large, and the number of the inmates so many, that he observed only a fraction. As he passed down an aisle of pillars his name was called, and he halted by a familiar group.

"Zekiah!" he exclaimed.

"Yea," replied the old man; "it is our day. I have

said farewell to all I love, and am at the mercy of the wicked. May our people be blessed, and the end swift. I am old and am resigned, but Christ be merciful to those who are yet in the morning of life!"

He looked towards Gabrial, who stood near, his arms about Ruth. Miriam and Mary were beside them.

Volgus greeted them, but they simply inclined their heads, the women not trusting themselves to speak. They were deathly pale, but had summoned a great resolution. The noise that came from without seemed to shake them as, wave on wave, it fell upon their quivering nerves, but otherwise they were tranquil.

"Christ is with us," said Gabrial. "Dost thou die?"

"No," replied Volgus. "I am not a Christian."

Gabrial said nothing.

"Knowest thou of Paul?" asked Zekiah.

"He is imprisoned at the Maximus," said Volgus, repeating what he had heard. "I have not learned of Peter."

"He is here," said Zekiah, pointing to another portion of the hall. "His presence is over the place like a benediction. It is he who has given us the courage to die."

"Through Christ," said Ruth, her cheek upon her husband's breast.

The ex-gladiator let his head fall as he thought deeply.

"Truly, it is wrong," he muttered.

"Naught is wrong," said Gabrial, his voice low but smooth. "From Palestine to Corinth, from Corinth to Corsica, from thence to Spain, and then to Rome, each step I have walked in trouble with thorns in my pathway. Young though I be, how joyfully would I leave this world if I could take upon myself the pangs of those about me."

"Selfish," murmured Ruth, her arms to his neck, a smile upon her wan face. "It is I, the woman, who should bear thy pain."

Volgus struggled with himself, his face troubled.

"I have had no wife," he said.

A man now came to them and stood by to listen. His face bore the leaden expression of all around him, tense with a suffering that had been mastered, yet the traces of which remained. His eyes were gaunt and hollow.

"Welcome, Linas," said Zekiah. "Art ready, my poor friend?"

"I am ready," replied the man. "We shall go shortly, I am told. I am alone, and have come to offer comfort to such as may fear. If I am presumptuous, pardon me, for God's grace hath seemingly fallen upon all our brethren. How is it with thee, sister?" he asked of Miriam.

"It is well," she answered, simply.

"Did I not promise to hold thy hand?" asked the child. "I have not forgotten."

"Bless thee, thou babe of Christ!" he said, stooping over her. "If Peter will permit, we shall lead the way. I do not fear that thy little feet will stumble. In thy tender strength the weakest will have courage."

Volgus turned away.

Walking through the wide hall he found a like spirit everywhere. Men and women were sustained as by some great exaltation. All were sombre and pale, and some were restless, but the general peace had startled even the stern soldiers who had looked in upon them, wondering at the sight. It was different in the rooms which had been set apart for the criminals. From there came wails and shrieks of terror, groans and curses mingled with unavailing prayers to the keepers.

Volgus went back to his friends.

"Brabano is dead," he said, simply.

"The great physician?" asked Zekiah.

"Ay."

"How died he?"

"Bravely. He stood like an oak with its branches spread to the day."

"In Christ," said Gabrial.

"Painlessly," continued Volgus. "He scarcely knew when death struck."

"The Lord be praised!"

"I have not learned of my master," said Volgus; "but his space on the benches is draped in black, which is a sign of condemnation. He is at the Palatine with his family, but as my master Fabyan is free, with the Briton Ethelred, I look to see Cæsar relent."

"Nay," replied Zekiah, gently. "He is here, with the noble Fulvia."

Volgus uttered a hoarse cry. He looked fiercely about him.

"And my young mistresses?" he cried. "Is *that* why my lord Fabyan is pale, and Ethelred and he are alone?"

"I know not," replied Zekiah; "but Lucius is here."

Volgus rushed away, his huge form darting hither and thither through the room. Then he ran from the chamber and up the court. He had a thought of seeking Fabyan even upon the benches, and the idea came to his brain to rush upon the podium, dash Cæsar to pieces, and throw his corpse into the arena. A noise came from the multitude, and he went again to the rail.

A body lay upon the sand, straight and stark, with its arms extended, grasping blade and shield; the right knee was bent upward as the man had fallen, and above him bowed his conqueror.

It was Calcus. He inclined his head before the shouting thousands, his lips turned in a cruel smile. Nero flung a wreath upon the sand.

The ex-gladiator scowled upon the victorious man fiercely.

"Thou wilt die yet to-day," he muttered. "I shall find thee."

As the body was dragged from the arena, and sand was thrown upon the torn surface, red with the blood, an edile announced the coming of a section of the Christians. The bars to the entrances which led to the cages of the beasts were lowered, and slaves loosed the stones above certain dens at the farther side. Through a subterranean passage which led from their cages under the intervening court the black panthers could make their way into the ring.

Volgus now hastened back to the chamber of the prisoners, his feelings in part under control.

"My master!" he exclaimed, as he entered the wide apartment. He had caught sight of Lucius, and rushed to where he stood with Fulvia, the form of Peter by his side.

"Our faithful Volgus!" exclaimed Fulvia.

Lucius had all the dignity of his age and training, to which was added something the freedman had never seen. He was calm at once, for his master was as he had seen him presiding at the birth-feast of his daughter. The disciple breathed about him a sense of peace that seemed to soothe the troubled atmosphere. His countenance betrayed the sympathy he felt for the hapless throng, but a superhuman vigor was in his thin form, and his gentle eyes looked a blessing that brought to each a great consolation.

"Thy mistresses are safe," said Lucius. "God hath blessed us out of His abundance, finding for me, a poor soldier, a glorious death in his service. I am not parted from the loved one with whom I have journeyed through life, and my children are left to give my seed to His cause. It was not permitted us to part from them as we might have wished, but that was in His mercy. Tell them, as I have said to our beloved Fabyan, that since I have found the truth, and some must die, I would scarcely have had it different. That will comfort them. Is it not so, my Fulvia?"

Fulvia lifted her eyes to his.

"It is so," she said.

The freedman listened dully.

"My young mistresses are safe," he muttered. "It is so much."

"So far," said Peter, gently, "the Lord hath impelled the tyrant's heart."

"Where is Paul?" asked Volgus, mechanically, seeking to learn if the Apostle, like his master, had been brought from the Palatine.

"Where God is," said Peter, his eyes to heaven; "there is Paul ever."

Volgus did not understand, but as he stood dumbly the soldiers entered the room.

"Make ready," said the centurion.

There was a stir among the prisoners, as those nearest the door moved forward.

"Go," said Lucius, extending his hand, as Fulvia did likewise; "farewell!"

Volgus knelt before them and kissed their fingers, and, as they were marshalled in the line that was slowly forming, left the chamber. In the passage near the entrance without he paused irresolute, scarce knowing what to do. A soldier motioned him aside, but he did not move. The forms of the Christians appeared in the entrance, the venerable disciple in the lead. His figure, usually slightly bowed, was now erect; the fringe of white hair about his head was as a nimbus of snow.

Volgus stepped aside, and then, almost immediately, his attitude changed from listlessness to attention; his irresolution gave place to an intense excitement. Calcus, the Gaul, wearing the crown of myrtle that Cæsar had flung to him, and bearing yet his dripping blade, crossed the entrance from where a crowd of his worthies were showering upon him their delighted praise. Volgus

sniffed his opportunity like a war-horse who scents the battle; his enemy was given to his hand.

With a howl he dashed upon him.

The Gaul stood instantly upon the defence, his blade in front, stooping slightly to receive his foe upon its point. But it was swept aside as a whisp of straw, and with his bared hands Volgus beat down his shield and struck him to the earth. Then he lifted the limp body high above his head to dash it to pieces against the stones, when a voice spoke in his ear and a restraining touch fell upon his arm. Slowly he suffered the Gaul to sink to the floor, holding him yet tightly, with the head thrown back; his fingers were wreathed in the hair, as those of the other hand clasped the throat.

He looked into the face of Peter. Once more he was irresolute, his eyes wandering and troubled. Long he stood above the helpless man into whose distorted countenance already had crept the agony of death. Then the iron clutch was loosened and the ex-gladiator drew back.

"Go!" he said, as he lifted the trembling wretch to his feet. "I am undone, but I forgive thee!"

With a cry like a wounded cat, the Gaul sprang away to safety.

"Peace, Volgus," said the centurion in charge, as his soldiers laughed at the scene. "Thou must not make us trouble. Stand aside, old man," he continued to Peter. "Get thee back into the chamber. Thou art reserved for a different fate. Such are my orders."

The disciple looked at the ex-gladiator with a smile upon his features, then at the soldier with a glance of inquiry. He lifted his hands above the solemn figures as they passed through the entrance, and they went under them, and the blessing which they carried, as under an arch of triumph.

Volgus stayed to hear or see no more. He strode

down the passage, and turning into a narrow lane that led away towards the spoliarium, stopped at a small door which opened into the arena. Through a grating in the upper panel he could see plainly. Upon the wall to his right was a rack of arms, arranged fantastically in accordance with the fancy of some keeper of the place. Among the weapons was a massive axe of strange make. It was a relic of some victorious foray into Germany, and, fitted to its haft of oak, it lay against the wall as an ancient trophy, too ponderous for ordinary hands. Volgus took it down and smiled to feel its weight. Then he looked into the arena.

The concourse upon the benches was hushed to silence as the sad procession entered. A hundred solemn figures, clothed in white robes, marched slowly through the gate. Young men and old, white-haired women and tender maidens, with faces set and hands clasped, kept step in solemn file. Before them came a man and woman, between whom, and holding to their hands, was the figure of a child.

No pity stirred the mighty concourse. This was the beginning of a drama for a hundred nights of memory. These were the vile Christians who had burned the city; they were to die a righteous death. But something in their bearing and upon their upturned faces made the great audience thrill with a feeling which it did not understand.

Near the centre of the amphitheatre the sad procession halted, and the soldiers left it; its figures grouped together, and a man, white-haired and tall, turned with lifted hand. The vast audience gave a single shout, short, sharp, and intense, and then its echoes ceased; it had recognized the Roman general, the honored patrician, Lucius. Under his command, given as calmly as he had marshalled the Roman legions, the pale group settled upon its knees, and he knelt also.

Tigellinus from the podium raised his golden wand. There was a rattle of chains without; the slaves tore with feverish haste the stones from the subterranean dens. One by one black figures, lithe and supple, stole into view through the openings, and then, from the wider entrance between, a troop of lions appeared. They stopped, as had Caligula, whose frenzied roars could yet be heard from his den without. The panthers were restless, but in the presence of the lions, they held back, surveying the scene with eyes of fire. Then, feeling the joy of freedom, they dashed about over the sand, smooth to their paws and heated to genial warmth by the sun, of which they had been deprived. Their bodies were rolling balls of sable, from which ever gleamed their white teeth.

The amphitheatre was silent. Its multitude was held as by a spell, and as the mighty tableau pictured itself to the mind and made its impression, never to be forgotten, the men bent their brows and the matrons hugged their children to their bosoms.

Nero nodded his head, and Tigellinus obeyed with a signal.

"What is it?" asked Crispinella, leaning forward, speaking to Paulina and looking towards the podium. Her speech broke the tense moment that held them.

"The other lion," said Paulo.

"See!" exclaimed his father, pointing with his finger. The roars without redoubled as the keepers forced Caligula from his cage; they drove him down the passage, through the entrance, and again into view. His appearance stirred the beasts already in the arena to the madness that possessed himself. They sprang upon each other in their rage, and the din of their screams filled the air.

With eyes aflame, with claw and fang, they tore each other in their frenzy, and the fighting mass, frightful

even to the callous eyes upon the benches, rolled nearer to the waiting and patient group.

Then the great multitude rose as a single person.

A man bearing a huge axe had dashed open a small door near the larger entrance to the spoliarium, and was running rapidly across the arena. Between the beasts and their victims he stopped, turning about to survey the benches as though gazing upon some familiar scene. He was broad and muscular, dwarfing in stature the best fighters that had paraded upon the sand. Extending his arms and holding his weapon high in the air, he stood, a figure of bronze against the white surface which surrounded him.

The lithe form of a panther flashed before him like a black ball; it had been thrown from the fighting mass and now leaped towards the pale group. The great axe described a circle of light and clove the beast in two. They came now in pairs, ferocious and snarling, and he struck them down. Then a lion fell before him. He sprang into the very midst of the frightful turmoil. His great body was flaked with blood, but he plied his weapon, dealing death in every stroke, until only Caligula was left. The great beast had drawn away, and now they faced each other.

The amphitheatre was as still as death; not a sound came from the mighty crowd that sat as one great eye and held its breath.

The man did not wait for the assault of the lion, but met his spring in the beginning. The beast stood half erect, and, struck by the axe, returned the blow, and both rolled in the sand, the talons deep in the man's body. The blade of the axe went forward from beneath, and the man arose. The lion struck him down again, and once more he struggled to his feet. The beast leaped forward, and the mighty weapon swung high; it fell with a crash upon the great head, and

Caligula rolled over in death, his talons digging in the sand.

The giant paused, bloody and breathless.

He looked for a moment upon the entranced multitude, still mute, and the pathetic group yet kneeling and waiting near him. Dropping his axe, he stooped for a moment, and when he arose the people saw that he held aloft the child. In a moment he had rushed across the arena, and tossed his burden like a feather among the benches where Fabyan sat, bending low to the rail.

The amphitheatre became alive once more. The awakened clamor was like a burst of thunder, that, peal on peal, shook the great structure to its base. With a single movement every arm went upward, the thumbs pointing to the sky.

But Volgus had seen only the face of Ruth, who had arisen now and stood clasped in the arms of Gabrial. She saw Ethelred relieve Fabyan of his burden and disappear with it in the mighty throng; she knew that her child was safe. The expression that shone upon the upturned countenance was beyond all words.

The officers had made no effort to interfere with the scene, for no sign had come from the podium. Nero was no less interested than the lowliest boy beyond the rail, and Tigellinus was speechless. But now the bars dropped from entrance after entrance, and a score of tigers bounded from their cages and rushed upon the scene. They were famished, fierce, and the smell of blood was in their nostrils. They did not pause.

The giant had resumed his place before the fated group, and the crowd was silent; its plea of mercy was not for him. His weapon lay upon the sand, and he now stood erect, his arms above his head.

"I am a Christian," he cried aloud. "Lord, Lord, I believe!"

A woman near him burst into a song as a tiger bore him down. It was the jubilant chant that Fabyan had heard at the little cemetery. Her companions took it up, and the melody rose clear and firm as each voice fell into the strain. The chorus, Christus Victor, swelled above the clatter from the benches, for the tigers were now among them. The scene was frightful, but the music rang sweet and strong:

"Triumphant Christ! Victorious King!
Nor death nor anguish terror bring.
Elate, our hearts enraptured sing
Our faith, our trust, in Thee."

The amphitheatre had lapsed into its momentary silence. Again the chorus rose:

"Though storm and night and darkness, all
Envelop heart and soul in pall;
Remembering Thou art all in all,
'Tis heaven alone we see."

The strain grew fainter now, as, one by one, the unresisting figures were pulled down upon the sand.

"Triumphant faith! Victorious love!
Which all the coming years shall prove.
Thy herald angels from above
Shall watch—and keep—"

It ceased.

The sacrifice was over. The attendants swarmed into the ring to drive away the glutted beasts and renew the ruffled surface of the sand, now red and frightful with the poor remains. But the blare of a trumpet stopped them at their work, as a troop of solemn gladiators entered with stately tread. Cainor was at their head.

Nero was patient, and Tigellinus made no sign. The

great form of the ex-gladiator lay apart, motionless and but little mangled. Stooping, they lifted it to a litter of spears and bore it from the scene of his ancient triumphs, where to-day he had won his last and greatest victory.

XXXV

THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

THE days passed and the games continued. An army of gladiators fell, and the Christians died by thousands; they were racked, torn, and mangled, and the beasts that slew them were themselves slain. Nero had made good his cruel word, and Rome was yet steeped in its bath of blood, but for the Amici the long agony was over.

Fabyan, however, was vividly to remember the events which immediately followed the death of his relatives. From the amphitheatre he went to the stricken home upon the Pincius to comfort its broken-hearted inmates. Valentina and Myrrha did not weep alone; freedman and slave alike were prostrate.

Under his direction, Clytes had preserved in the spoliarium all that was mortal of his relatives. He had taken them to a neighboring temple, where they had been burned to ashes. They were not entombed, but scattered to the winds of heaven, "to find God at last." He had bargained also for the body of Brabano, but his friend was gone. An earlier seeker had come to buy it, and when he appeared to make good his design, Clytes had shown him a handful of gold. He thought of Poppæa, now wasting at the Palatine, and of Berenice; one had been faithful.

Ethelred had followed the body of Volgus to where it lay in state at the training-quarters. They were to take it later to the house of Fabyan on the Viminalis.

Fabyan was yet a tribune, and he smiled to think of

his rank; the Emperor would relieve him upon request. But, sorrowing as he was, he was not despairing. His future was doubtful, but he was strong with life, and the girl of his heart was free. She, with Valentina, was grief-stricken, but both were young, with all that youth meant in its power to comfort and revive. Lucius had died a death of honor, and Fulvia had shared his fate. Time, though it strengthened memory, would bring comfort. The world was yet before him.

At the house of Lucius his memory received a shock as he came face to face with its new inmate, the child Mary, black-eyed, white, with silken hair, and tearful for the parents she had lost. He looked upon her with mingled feelings, and did not answer when she asked for Ethelred, but he saw also that she brought a strange comfort to Myrrha, who held her in her arms and wept with her in her grief; it was a passion and comfort which Valentina shared.

He recalled that Myrrha had been herself an orphan, as desolate almost as this lonely mite; he vowed within his heart that Mary should suffer nothing.

The child spoke of the beasts as they came across the arena, of the Christians with whom she walked, and the pitiless crowd around, of her father supporting her mother with a smile, and the good man who had bid them be brave. Valentina and Myrrha scarcely understood her, although they were familiar with scenes at the amphitheatre, but they had gone rarely and unwillingly, and had seen only gladiators fight, hiding their heads even at such spectacles as that. They were not to know the horrible details now. Fabyan had said that their dear ones had died nobly and without pain; and they were now in paradise.

Time justified his hope, and the days brought comfort. Nero and Tigellinus, engrossed in their cruel work, had seemingly forgotten them.

Volgus had been laid away, and each day Fabyan and Ethelred had gone to the prison. The ranks of the inmates were thinning. They saw Peter, with his wife and son yet left to him, but of Paul they could learn nothing. Fabyan spent lavishly in vain; some cell at the Maximus had swallowed him.

The horrid festival was drawing to a close. Upon a bright morning near its end Fabyan stood before the vestibule of the house of Lucius. He looked over the city, throbbing with life, despite the blackened surfaces that marked the course of the flames. Rome was his Rome no longer. His friendships saddened him, and his aspirations as a soldier were dead. His vigorous life was running in new channels, his heart softened by faith and his spirit suffused with love.

Upon this day he had remained at home with Myrrha, but Ethelred had gone to the city, and now, as Fabyan waited, he saw him returning. The Briton mounted the steps from the street.

"I have news," he said, "and a message."

Fabyan guessed its nature.

"From Paul?" he asked.

"Ay; he hath been brought to the Pompeian prison. The prætor hath not forgotten his threat. He is to die, with Peter, on the morrow."

The tidings were not unexpected, but the face of Fabyan grew sad.

"He hath asked for thee," said Ethelred.

"His message is a request to see the others—I guess it."

He turned his glance towards the chambers of the house within which were the precious objects of both their hearts.

"'Tis his wish, as he knew we would have it," answered Ethelred. "But neither Valentina nor Myrrha is to go to the prison. Marcus hath charge, and I

have paid him. He will bring his prisoners here under guard.

Fabyan's eyes lighted.

"They are on their way," continued Ethelred. "I came ahead to prepare thee."

"Preparation, indeed," said Fabyan, his eyes moist; "they die to-morrow."

He turned and went into the house, followed by Ethelred, to tell Valentina and Myrrha of the coming of their friends.

The offices of welcome were a seeming mockery, for slaves spread mats and carpets through the atrium, and in the dining-hall a table was loaded with viands; wines sparkled in crystal cups, and roses were festooned above the feast and between the pillars of the outer chamber; the fountain was started anew, and the slaves and freedmen marshalled themselves on either side of the vestibule as though for the coming of Cæsar.

It was a poor tribute, and arranged by the saddened girls with tears; but Fabyan knew that it was an offering from the heart, and lent them his sympathy and aid.

The revered guests came shortly. The soldiers waited without as Marcus brought his prisoners into the atrium, and, receiving the word of the tribune for their safety, permitted them to go with their friends to another chamber, while the slaves served him from the loaded table.

Following the greetings they seated themselves about the apartment, Paul between Ethelred and Myrrha. Peter smiled upon them with his benign eyes, for Paul had told him of Miriam's children with an emotion that had broken his recital with sobs.

The great Christians, although weary, were not depressed; their aspect was that of happiness, and they brought a suggestion of sunshine into the house that had prepared to receive them in gloom.

"It is a long journey that I have travelled, my children," said Peter, "but I look back over it in a spirit of peace; and since I came to know Him whom I have served I have known naught but joy. Is the speech strange to thee, in view of what we have so lately suffered? Trust me, the woes of life are meaningless except to teach; pain is futile that must end; sorrow provides a zest for the happier future, and none love Christ in vain."

"I have been so much a preacher," said the great Apostle, "that I seem to have lost all other forms of speech. But I would not have you grieve for us, and believe me, my dear ones, I go to the fate that I have known for years."

"We have found thee only to lose thee," sobbed Myrrha, giving way again to tears, and clasping his neck. "Ah, if I had but known before that thou wert the brother of my beloved mother!"

"I regarded thee as tenderly, almost," said the Apostle, his face bright. "I looked upon thee both with something of a knowledge of what was to follow. Ah, child, hadst thou but better known thy mother!"

"The sorrow is mine," said Ethelred. "Remember that 'twas I lost her first."

"Truant!" replied Myrrha. "'Twas she who lost thee—and I, thy unfortunate sister. 'Twas a bold and rebellious spirit thou hadst, even in the beginning."

"But thou art happy now in each other," said the Apostle, "and happy with friends to whom thou wilt cleave through the remainder of thy days. In Tarsus, in my youth—"

His head went back, and his face was as one who sought to revive old memories. He spoke first of Miriam. His speech was smooth, his voice light, with every trace of sternness gone. It was Paul with the burden of his work lifted now from his heart, and granted by

his Master a moment of rest at the close of his labors. He spoke of his youth, and in the voice of his youth, as his fancy widened; he laughed, and his laugh was melody. He took into his years the essence of the lives beside him as his spirit prepared for its final flight.

They listened, enraptured, and the blessed disciple, now in repose, sat with folded arms joying with the rest. Paul spoke on; he reached the period of his redemption, and told of it with a new power, as they listened, entranced; each detail of his labors followed, but their recital brought no sense of burden; they were done, and he was as one who exulted in what he had endured. His tale was one of triumph. He finished with a laugh of happiness and then a sigh of peace.

Now Peter spoke. The house was no longer one of death; the bright day was lustrous through the windows, bathing the room in sunshine; the spirits of those for whom they had mourned seemed now to come to the scene of their former home and bless it with their invisible presence. The story was of the Master, ever new upon the sainted lips of the speaker. The ancient voice was flutelike, the words caressing. How beautiful it was! The mockery of blood, and brutality, and pain, in which they and the wretched city had been submerged, disappeared, fleeing like a vanished nightmare to their lifted souls. The Heavenly Presence that had come to dwell its saving time on earth had opened all the future for them and all the world, and death lost its meaning of fear and became the door to the radiance that lived in the colors of the sunset; Christ's kingdom had come to earth, and they were a part of it. Long they treasured the recollection of that hour; in their memories it was sanctified forever.

It ended at last, and they arose solemnly. They prepared to part, but the sting was gone.

"Farewell," they said, as, marshalled again with the soldiers, they reached the final moment.

They embraced, the arms of Paul pressing tenderly the forms of Ethelred and Myrrha.

"God hath decreed to you a future," said Peter, as he stood to go. "Live as we would have you. Think of us with the gentleness that is in your hearts, and when the sun shall fall to-morrow, look for us towards the sky. Paul and I shall clasp our hands only for an instant as our ways go apart; they join again in the city of light. Farewell."

And then he blessed them.

They stood and watched the beloved figures as they disappeared in the distance, with steps as unfaltering as those of the soldiers beside them, and through their mingled emotions there quivered as music in their ears the echoes of the parting words:

"The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, abide with thee now, henceforth, and forever."

XXXVI

THE LIGHTS ON VATICANUS

DAWN had scarcely broken in the east when a procession of chariots, followed by numerous attendants, passed along the wide highway to the northwest of Rome, beyond the Vatican hill. They were not the vehicles used for races in the arena, but were of the domestic type, broad of beam, and cushioned for ease and comfort. Immediately behind came a train of pack horses and mules heavily laden, the whole being a rich and sumptuous equipment, evidently prepared for a long period of travel. The trappings of both horses and vehicles, together with the costumes of the slaves and attendants, disclosed the wealth and probable dignity of the owners of this caravan. There were hampers of garments, wine, and food; folded tents, with silken carpets and tapestries upon which to rest the weary limbs and shade from the eyes the rays of the noonday sun. The steeds were blooded and full of mettle, and stepped proudly in the morning air; it required the stout muscles of the restraining slaves to keep them in orderly array.

The cavalcade had crossed the Ælius bridge while it was yet dark, and pressed with some haste along the Via Triumphalis; but now, as though danger of pursuit or interference had lessened, it was moving leisurely to the north. Four figures of distinction lingered in the rear, having dismounted that they might walk together. Their speech was low and soft, broken at intervals by bursts of subdued but joyous laughter.

It was the spirit of exuberant youth, combating and overcoming its period of grief. The morning, with its freshness, the odor from the grasses and flowers that lined the roadway, the coming sun, and a sense of relief from care and danger were accessories of most powerful aid. Often they looked back towards the vanishing city, its lights faded in the gray of dawn. Their thoughts hallowed it as a familiar place of infinite delights and sorrows.

The figures walked hand in hand, Fabyan with Myrrha and Ethelred with Valentina.

In one of the chariots ahead, her face pillowed upon a cushion as she slumbered in peaceful and unconscious innocence, was Mary, and by her side in watchful care sat Regnus, the brother of Fulvia; he, too, had been invited to join the group that sought a greater safety beyond the immediate reach of the tyrant's power.

For days they had been preparing for this journey, and now that all their sad duties had been performed, since they had spoken the words of farewell to Paul and Peter, nothing remained to keep them longer in Rome; they had left their dwellings in the care of trusted freedmen, and were travelling to Brittany.

The way was long, and to the girls the prospect was strange. With the dread of those who had loved home they shrank from the dangers and trials of change; but their hearts were filled with love, and the confidence of each in both Fabyan and Ethelred was supreme. Ethelred had laughed away the question of fatigue and hardship, and when Fabyan suggested that they purchase a vessel and go by sea, had pictured their land voyage as one of pleasure.

"Think," he said, "of the green hills and the tender valleys; the mountains that stretch away to the blue of the heavens, and the silver rivers; I have seen them all. Our escort will be ample, the way is safe, and a

generous hospitality awaits you among my people. Thou wilt be doubly welcomed, since I return with the bride of my heart."

He grew enthusiastic as he dwelt upon the theme.

"We shall camp by running brooks," he continued, "or by the shores of wide lakes; we will talk under the shade of grateful oaks, and sleep at night in peace beneath the stars. After the days we have suffered here, it is a prospect of tranquillity and safety. I do not fear for my Valentina."

His plan prevailed, and the morning following the day of their parting with Paul and Peter found them upon their way.

Fabyan dared not trust for either himself or his friends the further indulgence of Nero or Tigellinus, and welcomed with a weight lifted from his heart their cold assent to his request for absence. The horror of Rome sat heavily upon him. He did not fear the confiscation of his goods or further persecution of his kindred; relieved of the reproach of his presence and engrossed in their immediate pleasures, the tyrant and his favorite would forget him. He saw with a prophetic eye the certain end of the cruel reign, and in its fall Tigellinus would be destroyed. Formerly he might have remained to give his fortunes or his life to such a result, but now he had done with war and intrigue. He had earned his period of love. There were enough who remained for the task, and who would strike no less for vengeance than from a sense of duty. In due season he would return with his Myrrha, and Rome would be for him a place for new efforts and honors. Meanwhile, in the far and free land of which Ethelred was prince, they would exult in health and safety, and put away the sad memories that oppressed them.

As the sun arose and the day flashed into being, they moved forward with lightened hearts. While it was to

Paul and Peter a day of fate, it was also their day of glory; the disciple had bid them so remember. Their own trials were over. Youth and hope were about them as the jocund day was in the heavens, and the world with its future was before them.

Night found them far upon their way, and they had halted in a grove beside a spring of crystal water. There was an inn in the village through which they had lately passed, but they wished for the quiet that would come from isolation and solitude.

After the meal, which they had eaten in the tents by the light of the torches, which their attendants had prepared, they went forth into the air. Their aimless steps led them to the slope of a green hill-side which overlooked a gentle valley below, through which they had lately passed; gloom had softly shrouded it, drooping, as a sable curtain, between them and the far city. They were wearied but happy, and, with hands clasped in hands that responded each to its tender touch in love, in peace, and with a sense of deep thankfulness for the dangers they had passed, they seated themselves together.

The day that had brought to the travellers its sense of freedom was in Rome closing upon the final tragedy. Peter, his venerable head fixed downward upon the cross, hung limp and lifeless, his martyrdom accomplished. Paul, the dauntless, the great Apostle, thoughtful but triumphant, had gone to the fate to which he was resigned. But there yet remained within the feverish prisons a thousand of the Christians; the beasts were surfeited. Nero and Tigellinus, ingenious yet, achieved the ultimate of villany.

Upon the eastern slope of Vaticanus, Nero, in his earlier days, had conceived a garden as beautiful as those of the Palatine. Its white walks of snowy sand ran to

the waters of the river, its background the marble structures of his circus. It was majestic, stately, and breathed from its myriad flowers a spirit of purity and good. Here fountains played and birds sang, and the restful cypress and tender willow shaded marigold, jasmine, and narcissus. Its soft colors gave back to the sky the beauty of its light, and its odors freighted the gentle air with benignity and sweetness. It was a spot of beauty —of sin, but sanctified; it was a paradise—dedicated to evil, but made sacred; its soil, enriched by the ashes of the saints and baptized in sweat and blood, became hallowed for all time.

At this spot Nero and Tigellinus arranged a spectacle as gorgeous as it was infernal. They had wearied of martyrdoms that were tame, and the sight of victims killed by lions and torn by fierce dogs had staled in repetition. They would thrill the populace anew. At intervals, along the white paths and above the crimson and purple beds of flowers, massive stakes were driven deep into the ground. Upon each a Christian was bound, men and women and children in impartial order. Just discrimination was observed; families were staked together that each might see the sufferings of the other, and above the piercing agony of the flesh feel a yet keener pang. A slighter stake, with a sharpened point, was set before them, that it might rest under the chin of the victim and hold his head upright; his countenance must not droop in either death or torture to hide his pain. To the waist of each, from the ankles up, combustibles were closely packed, saturated with pitch and oil.

The grounds were garnished with these living torches; row on row they lined the walks, set against the background of the waving trees and above the rose and myrtle. The gates were thrown open to the populace; it must witness and enjoy this mighty tribute of Nero to himself. There were soldiers to suppress disorder and maintain the

scene in lawful harmony. Throughout the afternoon the people came to view, to wonder, and thereafter to reflect. When darkness fell the fires were lighted. Nero and Tigellinus, each in his ivory chariot, drove down the blazing lines, bowing to the homage of the cheering thousands. Perhaps the shouts were meant to drown the groans of agony that went to heaven in the flames, for they ceased when the spectacle was over, and left in silence the charred and blackened spot, its beauty hidden in the darkness that had enveloped the stumps of the ghostly candles. The torches were burned out, and the games had ended. There remained only the reckoning which fate was to exact from the tyrant and his aid.

But to the watchers upon the far hill-side there came also a spectacle. In the distance the night was full of stars. They hung like fire-flies low down on the horizon, and then with seeming restlessness mounted into the vast abyss; they grew in volume and in number.

"What is it?" asked Myrrha, as they looked in awe and wonder.

"I know not," replied Fabyan, "and yet the banked radiance moves me strangely. I seem to look upon a picture."

"It *is* a picture," whispered Valentina, with breathless interest.

"I could almost fancy it the flight of souls to heaven," said Ethelred. "Never have I seen the sky so beautiful."

"'Tis in our hearts," said Fabyan. "But, look, how the stars group themselves; 'tis a strange and familiar outline."

They looked indeed.

The lights had thickened until the horizon glowed as with the colors of the aurora. Gorgeous in the night with a new beauty, its form now set in fire, the hill of

Vaticanus was blazoned in the heavens, its summit glowed. Shaft on shaft the lights played over it, changeful with gleams of emerald and sapphire, while far up in the deep blue arches of the sky the eternal stars were circled over a cross of light, shining like a promise above the summit of the radiant hill.

THE END

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